# Charlie Charlie

by Remiro Mejias

## Chapter 1

# Prologue

Dear reader,

What I'm about to share with you is not a fictional tale, and though your skepticism may convince you otherwise, I urge you to take my words seriously. There is a great evil in this world, has been for a long time. By day it poses as your friendly neighbor, your nosy coworker, your child's academic teacher, but by nightfall it lurks in the dark, plotting, scheming, conjuring. It is an evil that yearns to destroy us all, and it will not stop until it has won. There came a day when it almost did, but thankfully, I stopped them before it was too late. It's been over a decade since this happened, and it's only taken me this long to write about it because of how dangerous this truth can be. But now I find myself falling short of options. I need help.

You might recall a particular phenomenon that captivated the world some years back. It may have seemed like a harmless little game at the time, but I promise you, it was far from a game. It was called the Charlie Charlie Challenge, and it involved a pair of pencils as well as a sheet of paper. You would draw two lines across the page to make a cross, followed by writing "Yes" on the top left corner, "No" on the top right, "No"

again on the bottom left, and “Yes” on the bottom right. Then you would set the two pencils on top of each other, perpendicular to one another, and with the setup complete you would ask away a polar question. Many found it as an interesting opportunity to communicate with a spirit or demon, though few of them believed it was genuine, and much fewer outside of them were wise enough to stay away from it. But I will tell you now so that you may be conscious of the severity behind this danger: Charlie Charlie is not an imaginative figure; he is real, and if you have fallen victim to playing his game then I am sorry to say, you are at risk. The game was a trap designed by a cult that supported and admired him along with his beliefs. Taking part in this game allowed Charlie Charlie to interact with you, which resulted in a permitted entry into your life, and onto your soul. It’s our souls that he desires, not for the sake of consumption but for the sake of using them for his bargain with the Devil. Freedom is what he seeks. Freedom is what he must never obtain.

This may seem like a bit much. You may be wondering if any of what I am saying is true. You may be reading this thinking it’s just another horror story, but I beg of you to set aside your doubt and at the very least take what I am saying into consideration, because it is this same doubt that has allowed Charlie and his followers to operate unnoticed for so long and it cannot be allowed to go on any further.

In order for you to understand, I must recount to you my side of the story, the story about how the world nearly came to an end in under a week. Memory isn’t the most

reliable way to restate past events, especially since there's been quite a handful of years since they occurred, but I will try to detail as much as I can regarding what transpired and what certain people have said. Though it won't be their exact words, I'll do my best. Please bear with me.

I'll start off with when this all began. April, 2015. I was about 17 years old at the time living in Santa Fe, New Mexico. I was a student attending Pojoaque Valley High School and on track to graduate, though if you were to check the school's records, you likely will not find any history of me there. Charlie Charlie's followers have an expertise in making things disappear that way, as they do with people too. Their reach knows no bounds, they are among the highest positions of our hierarchy. They are everywhere, so please be vigilant as you continue reading.

Spring break was coming to an abrupt end, so I spent what little time I had left before being forced back into mundane classes doing what I enjoyed most. Drawing. Back then I was pretty good at it, but that was when I had the patience to go over intricate details and appropriate shading. Today that patience no longer lives. I remember the desk by my bedroom window being my favorite place to draw. There was a certain calmness in that spot, with the trees dancing in the wind just outside, and the natural light beaming in from an angle that wasn't so harsh. I'd go 6 or more hours just drawing away at that desk, listening to X Ambassadors, Maroon 5, The Weeknd…hell even Taylor Swift from time to time, though I kept her music private to myself. It was a

therapeutic practice, a great way for me to wind down and feel at peace. What I'd give to experience that again.

There came a day, it was about 2 or 3 days away from having to return back to school, where I was sitting at my desk drawing as I normally did, and a call interrupted my music. It was a video call from my good friend Sydney Alford. She and I practically grew up together since birth. Anytime I was in trouble, she had my back, and anytime she was in trouble, I did my best to return the favor. When we were kids, I had developed a crush on her but didn't have the courage to tell her, so I tried having her friend speak for me. But that friend, whether it was out of spite or jealousy, decided to inform Sydney's mother, and though she was a sweet lady with the greatest cooking hand when it came to apple pie, she told me that her daughter was too young to involve herself in any romantic relationships. But even as the years passed and I tried again as a younger teenager, her mother would not allow it. I think she found me unfit to be with her daughter, for what reason, I do not know. But it was because of this that I was forced to be okay with remaining as friends, and truthfully as the years continued to pass, I came to accept it, even after she and her boyfriend Desmond became a thing. Sydney served to be a great friend in my life, and for that I am grateful.

Throughout the spring break I had tried calling Sydney to simply check in, but never received a response or a text back later. So seeing her name finally appear on my

cell phone made me intrigued to see what she had been up to lately. And so I answered the call as I continued sketching.

“Well well well, look who decided to finally call,” I said

“Sorry, I didn’t have time to talk to dickless midgets this week,” she joked. “Been busy.”

“Is that right? Doing what?” I probed.

“None of your beeswax, nosy,” she stated.

This was our typical kind of banter-ish routine that normally carried some more playful insults. I believe my best one was when I called her an inbred fish Gollum for her comically enlarged eyes. It’s stupid and doesn’t really make sense, but it was a funny kind of back-and-forth thing that only she and I did.

“How have you been Syd?” I asked her.

“Okay I guess,” she sighed out before hesitating. “Actually, I’ve been a bit stressed out lately. My mom is on my ass about useless doctor appointments, Desmond keeps pushing me to eat enough nutrients…it’s just become way too much for me. And now the break’s almost over, we’re back to school on Monday and I’m not looking forward to everyone staring at me and talking behind my back again.”

“Just hang on for a little bit longer, you’re right at the finish line,” I tried consoling.

“That’s easy enough to say, but you and I both know it’s not gonna end there,” she continued. “I don’t want to face all the gossip that will come after, all the pressure, all

the murmurs beneath people's breaths. I've kind of been thinking about…dropping out?"

"Dropping out?" I exclaimed in shock. "Of school?"

"Yeah, I mean…maybe things will get better if I just focus on myself, you know? I wouldn't have to deal with none of this shit anymore," she explained.

"You're joking right?" I asked, still unsure if she was only playing a prank, as she did tend to do that often.

"No Remmy, I'm not," she adamantly stated. "Look you can say what you want but you don't know what this feels like. It's physically and mentally draining me and it's hurting more and more every day. I can't take it anymore, I just can't."

Realizing how serious the tone in Sydney's voice was, I set down my pencil to transfer all of my attention onto her, and I took a deep breath to prepare my rebuttal.

"Do you remember when you got into the Little League State Tournament team when damn near everyone said it wasn't possible?" I quizzed her.

"What? What does that have to do with-"

"Just answer the question Sydney," I interrupted, to which she responded with a sigh.

"Yes, I remember."

"Right, and remember when you whooped Tim Moldry's ass when he said some mean comments about my super cool slick-back haircut in the 4th grade?" I added.

“That was not a good look on you,” she responded with a laugh. “I still can’t believe your Mom let you go to school with that on your head.”

“Oh come on, it wasn’t that bad,” I argued.

“It was pretty bad.”

We both laughed. Truthfully I knew how abysmal that haircut looked on me back then, but if making myself the butt of a joke was what it took to uplift her spirits, even if it was only by an ounce, then I was more than willing to do so.

“What are you getting at Remmy?” Sydney finally asked.

“I’m getting at the fact that you’re not a quitter,” I answered boldly. “You faced a lot of things that were bigger than you before and you overcame them. All the people who doubted you, all the people who prayed upon your failure, you proved them wrong every single time. I know you have the strength within you to do it again.”

I held a gaze into her eyes through the screen of the phone, until I noticed a hint of her falling into agreement with my words. I then picked my pencil back up and resumed sketching.

“What are you drawing?” she kindly interrogated.

“None of your beeswax, nosy,” I echoed.

“Really? Come on, I wanna see.”

“Come to school Monday and I might show it to you,” I bargained.

I looked back at her face once more and saw the cogs turning in her head, contemplating, determining the outcomes of every possible decision.

“Fine,” she finally gave in, “I’ll go. But you’re doing my Financing homework for the rest of the school year.”

“Then it’s a done deal,” I said as I smiled through the screen, and she smiled back.

“See you soon then Remmy.”

“See ya.”

I hung up the call and set down my pencil for the final time to fully admire what I was drawing. It was a sketch of Sydney, unfinished but it was beginning to become one of my best works. I had planned on surprising her with it once I was done, hence why I didn’t allow her to see it. Never did get to finish that piece.

My appreciation for my art was soon disrupted by a loud crash that originated from downstairs. I could hear a feminine voice swearing the foulest words in return, and so I stood up and quickly paced my way down.

I found my mother, Audrina, on her knees picking up a set of knives that had fallen from the kitchen counter. She was dressed in hospital scrubs, as she normally did when the hospital called for her immediate attendance. Apparently she had been running around in search of her missing keys, of which she had a tendency of misplacing rather frequently. She was clumsy in that way. Oh how I miss her so, my sweet mother.

With a quick inspection of the couch in the living room, I pulled her set of keys that were buried in its crevices and handed them over.

“Hospital called?” I rhetorically asked.

“Yes! They say it’s very busy right now, I might not come back home until tomorrow morning,” she informed me.

“Then go. I’ll clean this up,” I said, to which she repaid my favor with a kiss on the cheek.

“Oh thank you Remiro. I love you” she replied, and she hurried out of the front door.

“If you’re feeling hungry there’s leftover lasagna in the fridge!” she added right before leaving.

That I do remember made me ecstatic, as her lasagna was a staple in my childhood and was always done perfectly, every time. I hurried myself as I cleaned the toppled-over knives in the kitchen sink, and I dried them appropriately so that there wouldn’t be any water streaks left behind on the blade. I did so with each blade, all the way up until the last one with the taped-over handle.

Now it is this blade that I must avert your attention towards, because it is this very same blade that would help me save the world in the next few days. Had this blade not been in my home, had this blade never have been manufactured or designed, you would not have been around to read this retelling, and I to write it. And if by now your

skepticism persists, I pity you deeply, because it will be your ignorance that causes a forthcoming doom should the enemy ever find a way to win. But if you have indeed gotten this far, I hope it is because you truly do believe there to be authenticity in this account of mine, and if that is so, I ask that you keep it to yourself for the time being. The evil that lingers in the night may try to silence any who speak in support of my claims, and though I am confiding in you for your help, it is imperative that you do so in a subtle manner that does not attract attention to yourself. Hopefully there will come a time when too many have come to realize the truth, rendering it impossible to silence everyone at once, but until that day arises, I beg of you dear reader, beware.

## Chapter 2

# Monday

The air was dry, as was usually the case. It hadn't drizzled for over a month, and the temperature was expected to be a bit bipolar. I wore a Harley-Davidson jacket at the time, one that had fit me since middle school due to the universe binding me with a curse to not grow any taller than 5 foot 6. The jacket did have an aura about it though, one that gave me a boost in confidence as strangers would every so often look my way to admire or compliment.

I rode my blue bicycle to school that morning since my mother wasn't available to drop me off. It was a coaster bike, which had also been with me since middle school, and though it was beginning to fall apart out of its years of usage, it was still very kind to me. What wasn't so kind was the padlock I used for the bike. I had found it a few months prior laying on the ground just outside of school grounds, and by using a YouTube video I found that involved jailbreaking locks, I uncovered the three-number dial combination and replaced the previous lock that I had lost with this one. Though after using it for a while, I understood why it was discarded to begin with as the shackle would often times get stuck and refuse to enter into its designated keyhole. And it did

exactly that when I arrived at school and attempted to lock my bicycle onto the bike rack.

"How many times do I have to show you how to do this?" asked a familiar voice.

An Indian boy then came to my aid, and I saw that it was my good friend Amir. He wore these circular Harry Potter-like glasses that always gave him a studious and intelligent impression, which he very much was.

"Gently slide the shackle into the hole, don't force it," he stated.

And as if he had a magical touch, the shackle obeyed his instruction and entered its keyhole. He had demonstrated this to me a few times before, but the shackle of the padlock defied me in every attempt I made. Amir blamed my brutish attitude for the lock's lack of cooperation, and if that's the case then perhaps the previous owner was also the same way.

"So how was your spring break?" Amir asked me as we made our way towards the school building.

"Dog shit," I replied. "I went on a bunch of stupid job interviews that wouldn't hire me and I applied to a bunch of colleges I know will never accept me."

"Sounds just as eventful as my week then," Amir related.

"It's like the older we get, the more boring everything becomes," I continued. "There's no more sleepovers or game nights…just a soul-sucking adult life that awaits us."

“At least there’ll be gambling,” Amir kidded.

“And alcohol,” I added.

“Yes! Lots of alcohol!” exclaimed Amir.

We laughed at our impending misery. At the very least we had that much to lighten up the bland road of life ahead.

“Anyway, how’s that book of yours coming along?” I questioned.

Amir had been collecting historical documents connected to his family origins for a few weeks. It started with an attempt to locate his father, whom he never got the chance to know. He and I were alike in that way, as my father passed away right before I was born. Amir was very good at doing research on any particular topic, he simply had that natural talent.

“I’m still working on it,” he answered, “it’s been surprisingly harder than I thought it’d be. I keep running into dead ends or roadblocks.”

“Well, if there’s anyone that can get through them, it’s you,” I cheered him on, to which he responded by pinching my cheek.

“Aww, you’re so cute when you give out cheesy compliments,” he teased.

I slapped his hand away as we entered the school building. I remember the air feeling a lot heavier the moment I took my first couple of steps in. I wasn’t sure if it was because of the lengthy time away I had spent from the school or something else, but something was off I could tell.

To make matters worse, I had Chemistry first period. I don't recall the name of the teacher, but I remember him to be a dreadful old Italian man whom I and countless others despised deeply. It was as though teaching was not his first choice, and yet there he was, unfortunately stuck with us. It also seemed like he enjoyed being disliked by all of his students, as the first thing he did when I walked into class was assign us all with a massive Chem Lab project that was due by the end of the week and was worth like 50% of our grade. God damn bastard. At least I had Amir to work on the lab with as my partner, but truthfully on that first day, I didn't care as much as he did to conduct any experiments.

"First day back and we're already doing a fucking lab. Unbelievable," I complained.

"Yeah," Amir agreed, "I think I'm the only one actually doing the work."

I initially thought that was his snarky way of telling me to make myself useful, but as I took a gander around the classroom, I noticed that practically no one else was indulging in the assigned lab. They were distracted, playing a strange game.

"Charlie Charlie are you there?" one of the students asked towards a piece of paper that held two perpendicular pencils.

I found it odd at the time, especially seeing how it captivated all the many other students who were huddled around this lab table patiently waiting for a response. Of course, I didn't understand it as well as I do now, and this lack of understanding inspired me to continue observing. Soon enough, the pencil that laid atop of the other

shifted in place on its own like the hand on a clock, and the whole cluster of kids around that table shrieked.

“Quiet back there!” shouted the Chem teacher before returning to his snooze behind his desk.

“What the hell are they doing?” I asked under my breath in confusion.

“They’re playing the Charlie Charlie Challenge,” Amir responded after a brief glance over.

“The what?”

“The Charlie Charlie Challenge?” he reiterated as if I were slow. “You haven’t seen the viral video with the two girls?”

“The only viral video with two girls I’ve seen was two girls and one c-”

“Okay okay, that’s not what I’m talking about,” he cut me off, knowing fully well what video I referred to as we both watched it together a few years before. That’s probably the day we lost our innocence.

Amir quickly pulled out his cell phone and looked up the video he was referring to. It was a video of two Hispanic girls, possibly sisters, sat by a small table in the outdoors. On that table laid a piece of paper with two pencils, just like there was on the lab table. I could see the words “Sí” and “No” scribbled on the four corners of the grid, and as the video played on, the two girls began asking a variety of different questions that were answered by the turning of the top pencil.

“It’s a Spanish video that released a few days ago,” Amir began to explain, “and it’s already got millions of views. You ask the spirit a yes or no question, and he’ll respond.”

“A spirit?” I stated with skepticism. “Charlie Charlie, that’s his name?”

“Yeah.”

“And people are really buying into this bullshit?” I asked as I giggled.

“It’s not bullshit,” Amir solemnly replied.

“Amir, I could recreate this with fishing string easily. It’s fake,” I confidently claimed.

Rather than arguing against me, Amir opened his notebook and tore out a sheet of paper.

“Give me your pencil,” he requested.

I gave him my pencil, and with it he put together the same setup as the kids at the other lab table created, placing my pencil over his atop of the paper. He then looked into my eyes as he challenged my doubt.

“You wanna ask him a question or should I?”

And as I examined his earnest gaze some more, there was a certain seriousness behind it that faintly unsettled me, as though it was driven by a genuine belief that I shouldn’t dare question nor ignore.

“No, I’ll let you complete the demonstration,” I offered.

Amir scoffed at my fallen confidence and averted his attention towards the game set up. After a moment in silence, he asked his first question.

“Charlie Charlie, are you there?”

I watched very closely at the setup as well as Amir’s hands and demeanor to see if he would tamper with the pencils in any way. But no. The top pencil rotated on its own until both ends pointed to “Yes”.

“You see that?” Amir asked in shock.

I wasn’t exactly sure how to respond, I was in shock myself, though I did my best not to express it. Amir then reset the top pencil back to its original position and asked a new question.

“Charlie Charlie, am I using fishing string to rotate the pencil?”

The top pencil then rotated on its own until both ends pointed to “No”. Amir smiled as he looked over at my baffled state.

“Still think it’s fake?” he questioned.

I had no way of explaining what I had witnessed, the fishing string theory went out the window, but it still held more ground in my mind than some communicative spirit. That theory, I’m sure you might understand, seemed too unsubstantiated to be true.

“Yeah I’m not buying it,” I stubbornly responded. “That’s probably just…gravity, or something.”

“Really Remmy, gravity?” Amir stated as if that were more stupid than talking spirits.

“Or maybe it’s just your hot breath moving the pencil,” I bantered, “maybe that’s what it is.”

“Yeah okay skeptic, whatever you say,” Amir replied as he rolled his eyes.

We then went back to focusing on the lab project, or at least Amir did as my mind still wasn’t up to it, too preoccupied with the constant thought of this new game and the way it worked. It bothered me that I couldn’t come up with a logical explanation on why the pencil moved on its own, and this repeating nescience obstructed my mind all day, especially when all of the following classes I attended were filled with classmates playing this game. It was as though it were teasing me, tempting me to unveil its secrets knowing full well that I was struggling to. And this went on all the way until lunch time, as all the tables within the cafeteria were covered with more sheets of paper than metal lunch trays. I was amazed by how strong of an enthralling effect the Charlie Charlie Challenge had on the entire school.

I was able to see Sydney amidst the crowd as I stood in line behind Amir waiting to collect my lunch. She was sat next to Desmond, and I remember thinking how different she looked even though it had only been a little over a week since I last saw her in person. She was clearly further along, the large bump on her belly appeared larger and I wasn’t the only one who noticed. In the thick of the chatter and laughter that echoed

throughout the cafeteria, I could hear the murmurs of neighboring students who pointed discreetly as they spoke words like “Her belly got so much bigger in just a week” and “Her life is so fucked now” and even “Should’ve worn a condom”. They were despicable, and it’s no wonder why Sydney didn’t want to return to school. These people were the root of her stress, but despite their crudeness, Sydney still showed up like she said she would and I couldn’t be any prouder of her.

Amir and I walked over and sat with Sydney and Desmond with our lunches. Desmond had his school football jersey on. He played as a quarterback, or maybe it was a running back, I don’t remember. The school’s football team as a whole was shit anyway, we never won any games.

“Nice to see you made it Sydney,” I said as I sat down.

“Yeah. I almost didn’t,” she replied with a low gaze.

“Thank you for changing her mind Remmy,” Desmond commended. “I couldn’t convince her for the life of me.”

“That’s what friends are for,” I stated with a smile, to which Sydney responded with a smile of her own.

“So this Charlie Charlie thing’s got everyone on a chokehold, huh?” said Desmond as he took a glance around the cafeteria.

“It’s incredible how it works,” Amir added. “I mean it’s not even random responses. You can ask the same question 100 times over and you’ll get the same answer without fail.”

“So it’s an actual spirit that’s communicating through the game?” Sydney questioned.

“It’s not an actual spirit,” I jumped in to repudiate.

“It could be,” Amir contradicted.

“You can’t contact a ghost with two pencils and a piece of paper, that’s stupid,” I tried reasoning.

“Oh what, you’re a paranormal expert now?” Amir stated with sarcasm, “‘cause it sure left you baffled in Chemistry.”

“You played the game Remmy?” Desmond asked.

“No I didn’t play-”

“I gave him the option to but he chickened out,” Amir intervened.

“Aww Remmy, you’re afraid of ghosts?” Sydney teased.

“No, I don’t believe in the paranormal but I’m not an idiot either. If there’s something that you can’t really explain, best to stay away from it.”

“Aww Remmy, you’re afraid of ghosts,” Sydney repeated, to which I couldn’t help but roll my eyes and chuckle at her ridiculous taunts.

The janitor soon then came over with a trash bin to collect the trays of anyone who was done with their lunch. That's when the madness of everything truly began. It was right as Desmond changed the subject to something I could tell since the moment I sat down he's been wanting to speak about.

"You know, I've been thinking a lot about last summer," he said.

"Oh God not this again," Sydney blurted out.

"The camping trip up in Colorado?" Amir asked.

We had taken a vacation last year during the summer break to Colorado, just the four of us. It was an incredible experience that brought us closer together than ever before, but there was a part of that trip that…didn't exactly go as planned is the best way I can put it, and not everyone knows, or knew, the full story. It's the kind of trip that you do once and realize you can never do it ever again.

"Yeah," Desmond responded to Amir. "Honestly for me it was the best two weeks I've had in my life. I mean we had such a blast, right?"

"We made a lot of bad decisions," Sydney stated.

"Yes, many bad decisions," I concurred.

"But they all turned into lifelong memories, didn't they?" Desmond countered. "I say we do it again this summer, and we should do it bigger and better than before-"

There was a loud CRASH of a metal lunch tray hitting the ground, along with a multitude of gasps. The four of us looked over in the direction of the sound, and I saw

Pauline Bohannon, a thin ginger-haired student, stood on her toes with her head tilted back and eyes rolled up as her hands made eerily rigid movements. It was as though she was being possessed in that moment.

“Pauline?” Desmond called out as he slowly approached her.

And in response, she collapsed onto the floor and began convulsing rapidly with white foam escaping from her mouth. She was having a seizure. Everyone surrounded her in panic. A few of the students, such as Desmond, tried to help her without really knowing how to, while the greater majority of students pulled out their cell phones to film the occurrence. That was the state of society back then, and truthfully I don’t believe it’s gotten any better over the years.

Eventually the school staff members rushed in to disperse the students and check in on Pauline. As she continued to spasm in place, I noticed a tattoo on her ankle that unveiled during her fall. It was a unique symbol in the shape of a crescent moon that split in the middle and had three lines of different lengths stacked to the side. Despite not knowing what it was or what it meant, it felt very familiar as if I had seen it somewhere before. Perhaps in a movie or in one of my many old comic books, I couldn’t quite put my finger on what at the moment.

And in a miraculous turn of events, Pauline’s seizure suddenly stopped. She looked at the school staff members who asked if she was okay, and when she sat herself up she looked at all of us with a confusion in her eyes, like she wasn’t sure where she was or

how she got there. She then quickly lowered her head to shield herself from the gazes and camera lenses that everyone had on her.

The rest of that school day is a bit of a blur. When it came to an end however, I do recall seeing Pauline once more sat in her father's old sedan as he spoke with one of the school staff members. I'm not sure why she wasn't sent home early that day but she did seem completely fine right after her incident.

"That poor girl just had a seizure, and she doesn't have any friends to be there for her," Sydney sympathetically mentioned as the four of us stood and watched from the school's entrance.

"That's because she doesn't socialize with anyone, always keeping to herself," Desmond highlighted.

This much was true. Pauline was in the same grade as us but rarely anyone really knew who Pauline was outside of her name. She was a loner in that way.

"Isn't she your next door neighbor Remmy?" Amir asked.

"Yeah," I confirmed.

"You should stop by her place, see if she's okay," suggested Sydney.

"I mean…she looks okay to me," I said as I looked from afar.

"Remmy-"

"Alright okay, I'll check on her," I assured her.

Mister Bohannon soon shook hands with the staff member, then entered his old sedan and drove off with Pauline. I then said my goodbyes to the gang, and went off to fetch my trusty blue bicycle and my crusty combination lock before making my way back home. On the ride home, I noticed people all around me indulging in the Charlie Charlie Challenge as I rode through the urban streets. It made me realize just how firm of a grasp the hypnotic nature of this game had achieved. It reached further than just the school, it was like the whole world was playing this thing.

I eventually made it to my sound little house in one piece. It was a townhome that I had lived in for most of my life at that point. I wasn't a fan at first when I moved in with my mother as a kid, but over the years it grew on me and I learned to love it. Before stepping inside, I recalled my promise to Sydney as I noticed Mister Bohannon giving his vehicle a wash on the driveway. His car had these bright pink rims on the wheels that looked absolutely ridiculous, but to each their own I guess.

"Good afternoon Mister Bohannon," I called out as I dismounted my bike and walked over.

"Remiro!" he exclaimed in a slight Southern accent. "Hey, how are you?"

"I'm doing well. I uh…saw what happened with Pauline earlier," I began explaining, "just wanted to stop by and ask if she's doing okay."

"Well that's mighty kind of you kiddo," Mister Bohannon stated. "She's feeling much better now, thank you for asking."

“She sick with something?” I probed.

“No not at all,” he assured. “She’s just been going through a lot lately. Her sister’s passing has taken a huge toll on her.”

“Sister?” I said, this being my first time hearing that she had one.

“Yeah. She had a twin sister, ain’t she tell you?” Mister Bohannon asked.

“No sir,” I responded. “Pauline doesn’t really speak to anyone at school unless she has to.”

“Oh yes, her sister Samantha was very much the same way, unless they were with each other. Those two were inseparable I tell ya,” he said with a weak chortle. “But one day, Samantha fell terribly ill. Doctors found a brain tumor in her head, and from then on it just got worse and worse. Same shit that took her mother.”

“Wow…I’m very sorry to hear that, very sorry for your loss,” I commiserated.

“I appreciate that son,” he replied with a soft smile. “I’d invite you in for some dinner or something but Pauline doesn’t exactly like having guests over.”

“Yeah I figured she’s more of the introverted type. Nothing wrong with that, I’m somewhat the same way. Anyway, I’ll leave you to your car wash. Nice rims by the way,” I lied.

“Thank you Remiro, and thanks for stopping by. Tell your mother I said hello.”

“Will do,” I said as I began walking over to my house.

But after only a few steps, I stopped to look up at the second floor of the Bohannon residence. I could see Pauline sat on the windowsill reading a book. She seemed at peace there, as though that was her favorite spot to read just as my window was my favorite spot to draw. At some point, she noticed me looking at her from below. I gave off a smile and a little wave just to show some human decency, but she returned the kind gesture by moving away from the window. I get it, being so reserved to yourself can sometimes make it difficult to interact with others, so I simply brushed off the subtle rudeness and made my way back home.

Upon entering, I found my mother snoring away on the couch as she had done plenty of times before after a long overnight shift. I've asked her before why she'd always rest on the couch rather than her own bed, and she pointed out how it's the first thing her tired eyes would come across when walking in. I've tried sleeping on the couch once before but the stiffness of the springs made the experience too uncomfortable for my liking. Again, to each their own.

My mother was a light sleeper, no matter how tired she was, and so I carefully grabbed her blanket and tucked her in it a bit better before tiptoeing my way up the stairs to my bedroom. I planned on taking a nap myself as I didn't catch much sleep during the night, which was always the case for me transitioning between Sunday to Monday.

I took a quick shower and with my hair still wet I plopped onto my bed and looked over at the nightstand. It had a picture frame on top that held a torn photo of my mother when she was pregnant with me. It's a photo that I had to fetch from the trash after my mother threw it out along with all the belongings she had stockpiled over the years that carried any relation to my father. He wasn't a great man, he tried to harm my mother before I was born, which is one of the many reasons why she doesn't like to speak of him. She was utterly pissed when she found the photo hidden away in my closet. She wanted it destroyed, but the photo held a piece of history that stretched beyond what I was able to remember, and so I pleaded to at the very least keep the portion that had her in the photo, to which she reluctantly agreed. And so the photo sat on my nightstand with the part that had my father ripped out, though you could still see a sliver of his arm at the very edge of the picture.

Right next to the picture frame was a digital clock that read 5 something in the afternoon. I told myself I'd only allow just 5 minutes of rest, and with that timer in mind, I closed my eyes. What came next was an amalgamation of images and scenarios that my mind played out for me, with much of it not connecting with each other or making any sense, and much of it which was swiftly erased after awakening. But there was one dream that boldly engraved itself into my head, one that I have had numerous times before for as long as I can remember.

It starts off with a clouded sky that carries a darkness to it, threatening to pour down rain within the coming hours. I'd hear a harmonic humming coming from deep within the swarm of trees that surrounded me, amplified but with no real certainty of where the origin might be. And so with a lack of lucid control, I'd walk through this forest in pursuit of the noise, eventually making it to an open area absent of trees and flowers. At the center of this barren space stands some kind of a platform, and surrounding this platform are tall monoliths that look to be made of stone and carry various strange symbols etched all around. The humming gets louder, but no matter where I search or for how long, I can never come to find the source of the sound. And then I get a feeling, a dreadful stomach-churning feeling that traverses throughout my body. I get the sense that I'm being watched and that they're right behind me, but I'm too fearful to turn around because as long as I do not see them, they do not exist. But the lack of lucid control once again takes over and forces me to turn around, and in the far distance, I can see a figure failing to blend in with the trees. It is a huge dark figure abstract in detail, though I can make out the four horns that protrude from its head. All goes still as it and I lock eyes, with nothing but the sound of my frightened heartbeat thumping in my ears.

And then I awake, and on that particular Monday night I awoke to find that the digital clock now read 10:20ish, well past my budget of 5 minutes. I cursed myself out, angered that I allowed that much rest time knowing that I had to be up early for school

the following day, but also angered at the stupid dream that continued to haunt me despite all of the countless attempts I made to make them go away. Sydney had advised me once to go seek counseling with a professional therapist, but therapy had always seemed like a scam to me in my younger years. How can a total stranger give advice on how I should go about my life, and then have the audacity to charge me money for it? Of course, nowadays my views have changed and I seek counseling regularly, but back then it simply wasn't a viable option in my opinion and I was just glad that the nightmare was over, even if it was only momentarily. But truly in that moment, I had no way of knowing that despite my sudden awakening, the nightmare had only begun.

## Chapter 3

# Tuesday

I was tossing and turning all through the night until about 3 or 4 o'clock in the morning, all due to the imbecilic mistake I made of not saving the rest that I needed for bedtime. And also due to this mistake, I slept through my 6 AM alarm but was lucky enough to wake up and notice the time just as first period was set to begin. I threw on an appalling outfit and hauled ass as fast as I could to the school. I quickly parked my bike along with the others on the bike rack, tried my luck with the padlock before completely giving up on it, and rushed into the school building.

When I got to class, I was met with a warm welcome from my favorite teacher.

"Remiro, you are late," the Chem teacher bellowed.

"Sorry I know, sorry," I replied as I hurried over to Amir.

Amir handed me latex gloves and a pair of goggles. He was in the middle of conducting a vital experiment, which I had agreed to actually help out with the day before.

"You look like a mess," he pointed out.

“I had trouble sleeping last night,” I began explaining as I shoved on the gloves. “I tried taking a nap yesterday and…well let’s just say it was more than a nap. Every time that happens I get the same dream without fail.”

“Oh really? Of what?” Amir asked.

“A bunch of these strange monoliths surrounding some kind of pedestal in the forest,” I described. “It’s a weird dream, but I’ve been getting it since I was a kid.”

“Oh yeah, those are called recurring dreams,” Amir clarified. “I also get one of those, but mine is of a naked mime that chases me at night. Maybe it’s some kind of message.”

I couldn’t tell if he was joking or not, but I do think I looked at him with a face of confusion and disgust, maybe even concern. He then walked me through everything he had done so far, and for the rest of that class I put in some effort this time and helped out where I could. I was never really great with anything academically related, especially reading and writing. Throughout elementary school and bleeding into middle school, I was reading at about four or five book levels below the average student. It was bad enough that my mother took me to get tested with a specialist to determine if I required special education, like those with slow minds would. But luckily for me, I passed those tests with flying colors. My issue is that I tend to lose focus. It’s like my attention span has a battery that drains a bit too quickly, and so to avoid this, I tend to

avoid doing schoolwork altogether. It's a miracle that I made it as far as I did honestly, but I acknowledge that my friends played a big part in that.

One thing that I was really good at though was drawing, and fortunately for me Art Class was up next after Chemistry. I had the class with Sydney, who I convinced to enroll with me just so I could make fun of whatever she made. She was terrible at drawing, or painting, or sculpting or anything art-related in general, but she knew this and was always open to a fun ridicule. We were assigned to create a still life piece of a bowl of fruits propped at the front of the class under a desk lamp.

"Focus on the proportions as well, not just how the shadows react with the light. The banana should not be bigger than the pineapple," advised the Art Teacher.

My sketch wasn't all that good, at least not in a way where I could look at it and feel pride. I've done a better job plenty of times before, but looking around the room I could see that my piece still held more accuracy than most. Sydney's was by far the poorest quality. The perspective was not flush and though she made an attempt with shading, the fruits still looked flat on her canvas.

"You're such a show off," she said as she looked at my work to compare with hers.

"That sounds like jealousy," I countered.

"All that time and effort just for one A+," she heckled.

"Well shit, if it'll save me from the F in Geometry that's tanking my GPA, I'll take it," I stated, which made Sydney laugh.

I continued improving my artwork, utilizing the tools provided to me optimally. Meanwhile Sydney tried fixing her unfixable drawing, but eventually gave up.

“Yesterday after school,” she eventually said, “Desmond talked non-stop about that trip we did last summer. He went on and on about how life-changing it was, and all the ideas he has for the next one-”

“Next one?” I stopped her. “Wow, he’s really serious about doing it again huh?”

“Oh yes he is,” she confirmed. “I told him it’s probably best if we don’t because once the…”

She quickly checked her surroundings and leaned in closer to me to speak in a lower tone as she referred to her belly. It’s not like everyone hadn’t already realized she was pregnant, but the topic still did embarrass her.

“Once the baby arrives, we’ll have way too much on our plate and the next summer trip might not be as fun as the first.”

“What’d he say?” I asked.

“That it wouldn’t bother him…and that he’s looking forward to spending quality time with his newborn son.”

I had to pause and set aside my utensils after hearing that. There was a hidden meaning within that sentence that only Sydney and I could understand in the moment, and it was enough for me to change the subject after a few seconds of silence.

“I think I’m finished,” I said referring to my canvas.

“Looks good,” Sydney replied.

I decided to take another look around the classroom to ease off my mind and observe the works of my classmates. Some were good, some were terrible, some weren’t even trying. But there was one drawing that caught my eye, and the more I watched, the more concerned I became.

At the very front of the classroom, right by the bowl of fruits, there was a ginger-haired girl making eerie movements with her hand as she glided the pencil across her canvas. The drawing that she was creating did not bear any resemblance to a bowl of fruits whatsoever, but rather, a dark abstract figure with four horns. Not only was it alarming, but it was mind-bending, like Christopher Nolan's Inception mind-bending, and it left me feeling very uneasy.

I knew of course at that moment that this ginger-haired girl was Pauline, and when the bell rang, I chased after her before she could slip away to her next class.

“Pauline! Hey, wait!” I called out in the hallway.

She stopped and turned to face me, where I noticed tired eyes beneath her confused expression.

“Hey. You remember me, right? Your neighbor?” I tried reminding, to which she responded with a blank stare.

“Doesn’t matter. I saw the drawing you were making in class. Didn’t exactly look like a bowl of fruits to me.”

She must have thought I was trying to mock her or something because after hearing those words, she turned about-face and continued walking to her next class. But I wasn't ready to back down just yet.

"Hang on, Pauline, I just want to know what it was you were drawing. Can you explain it to me?" I asked, but she ignored.

"Pauline please! It looks exactly like the thing in my dreams, I'd like to know what it is."

And with that sentence, she stopped in her tracks and turned to me again, this time with a wide stare.

"You see him in your dreams?" she finally asked.

"Yeah…yeah that's what I said. Do you know who he is?" I probed deeper.

Pauline continued her stare into my eyes, with a complete lack of blinking. She then scanned me down and up. It left me feeling a bit uncomfortable, she was acting strange, which seemed to be the norm for her as of late, but still.

"I'll tell you everything you need to know," she eventually said, "but not here, not now. Meet me in the girls' locker room after school."

"What, why does it have to wait-"

"Just be there," she asserted. "Come alone."

And with that, she turned back around and resumed her walk towards her next class. I stayed standing there with a flood of questions invading my mind, many of which I intended on asking her during this scheduled appointment.

“What was that about?” Sydney asked as she walked up to me.

“Um…I asked her a question and she said she’ll give me an answer in the girls’ locker room after school.”

“The girls’ locker room?” she repeated. “Remmy, you dirty dog! I didn’t know you were into Pauline like that.”

“It’s not like that,” I tried clarifying.

“Sure it is,” she stated with a sarcastic tone.

I rolled my eyes and accepted defeat as I continued my walk down the hallway, but Sydney walked alongside me to sing a little childish jingle for shits and giggles.

“Pauline and Remiro sittin’ in a tree, K-I-S-S-I-N-G!”

Of course I found her banter a little funny, and the whole mysteriousness behind what Pauline was going to share with me at the end of the day left me curious for the following classes, but there is absolutely nothing humorous nor fascinating about what transpired in the girls’ locker room later that day. See, the whole idea of this meeting needing to take place in a private area didn’t sound all that right to begin with. At the very most, I was expecting this recurring image of the four-horned figure to come from some old cartoon or something that I had watched a long time ago and forgotten about,

but that wasn't a topic that needed to be explained on a one-on-one basis. And so as I approached the girls' locker room, I felt an uneasiness about me that only grew stronger the closer I got to the door. But I brushed it off, reached for the door handle, turned it, opened the door, entered the locker room and allowed the door to shut on its own. Little did I know, I wouldn't be able to open it back up again.

The lights were off, and everything was quiet.

"Pauline?" I called out.

I walked over to the light switch and flicked it up, then down. The lights did not come on.

"Great," I muttered to myself.

I walked a bit deeper into the locker room hoping to bump into Pauline somewhere, but it seemed like it was just me in there.

"Pauline?" I called again. "I can't see a damn thing, you in here?"

And as I walked along the wall, I heard a crunch coming from beneath my foot. I raised my foot and lowered myself to get a closer look. It was broken glass, and right beside me I could see the fire extinguisher case was shattered, but the fire extinguisher was still inside.

"Pauline!" I stated with a more anxious tone. "Are you there!?"

But with still no response, I decided to call it quits and head back home.

"Waste of my fucking time," I said to myself.

I walked back over to the locker room door, but when I tried the knob, the door wouldn't open. I turned it both ways, I jiggled it back and forth, but no matter what I tried the door wouldn't budge.

"What the hell?" I remember were my last words.

As I tried slamming my body against the door, my efforts were interrupted by a terrifying screech behind me, and when I quickly turned around I saw Pauline charging at me with a glass shard in her hand.

Before I could say anything or think to say anything, she stabbed me on the shoulder. She then pulled back and went for another stab but I shoved her back just before she could. I tried stepping away but she chased after me, swinging the shard around to get another drop of blood out of me.

"DIE! DIE! YOU WILL DIE!" she shrieked.

I grabbed a hold of her and managed to pin her against the wall in a way where her arms were restrained, but the hand that wielded the shard was wriggling free, so before she could attempt another stab at me, I lifted her up and dropped her to the ground like a WWE pro wrestler, then ran away and hid myself in one of the lockers. The adrenaline was helping to mask the pain of the stab wound but not the fear bestowed upon me. I tried controlling my heavy breath to blend with the silence of that room, but as I heard Pauline get back up to her feet, I couldn't help but panic a bit.

“You’re not getting out of here Remiro,” she declared. “Door’s jammed. One way in, no way out.”

I tried getting a visual of her through the slits of the locker door, but because they were so thin and because it was so dark, I could only rely on what I could hear. And she sounded closer with every word.

“I knew, oh I knew there was something strange about you, though I could never be sure. But your dream has validated what I long suspected of you.”

She began kicking open lockers, each one nearer than the last.

“You are the spawn of Charlie Charlie! His malice called upon you through your dreams, just as he did your father’s dreams and the dreams of his father. He will not be stopped unless you die, so you must die!”

I could then finally see her through the slits of the locker, which wasn’t a good sign, she was getting too close.

“It’s a wonderful miracle. After losing you all those years ago, we have finally found you again.”

And soon enough, she was standing directly in front of my locker. She knew I was in there, she had to have known.

“And I won’t let you get away this time.”

Before she could have a chance to open the door, I abruptly pushed it open and bumped Pauline out of the way, but with nowhere to go it wasn’t long before she

pounced onto my back to stab me three more times. I cried out in pain as I fell to the floor, and I tried crawling away as a last fleeting moment. Pauline then grabbed a hold of me and flipped me over belly side up to mount on top of me. She pushed my jawline up with one hand to expose my neck, and held the glass shard up with the other hand. I tried fighting back but she was oddly stronger than she looked.

"YOU! MUST! DIE!" she screeched.

Pauline let out a battle cry of sorts, and right when she was about to deliver the lethal stab, I heard a BONK, and Pauline fell down to my side, knocked out cold. I looked up and saw Sydney stood above me in the darkness, holding a fire extinguisher in her hands.

"Oh my God are you okay?" she asked in a startled tone.

I then heard the locker room door open which allowed a flood of light to enter the room, and when I looked over I could see Amir and Desmond stood by the doorway.

"Sydney?" Desmond called out.

"I'm in here! Remmy's bleeding!" she announced.

Desmond rushed over to Sydney's side and they both examined my condition. The lights then came back on as I saw Amir come out from the breaker room, and the four of us were able to see the bloody mess on the floor and my clothes a bit better.

"Jesus Christ what happened?" Desmond asked.

I tried explaining but I was completely out of breath from fighting for my life.

“Alright man let’s get you out of here. Amir!” Desmond hollered, and Amir came running.

Amir and Desmond lifted me off of the floor and helped me walk towards someone who could help. The police were called and after explaining my side of the story, they swiftly apprehended Pauline and brought her into custody. I had a few stab wounds but I knew through my mother’s medical teachings on things to look out for that nothing important was punctured or damaged. In fact, I was actually feeling pretty okay despite what had happened, so when I was offered medical treatment by qualified professionals, I declined and simply headed home. Of course, my mother reprimanded me for my decision.

“Jesus Remiro, why didn’t you let the police take you to the hospital?” she grilled me as she tended to the stab wounds on my back.

“Because you went to med school,” I answered.

“I’m a nurse, not a doctor,” she reminded, to which I was aware.

She then passed rubbing alcohol on the wounds and they burned so much I swear I heard them sizzling.

“When I’m done here, I’m going to go talk to that crazy bitch’s father,” she declared.

“No no no no no,” I begged, “let’s not make things any worse than they already are, okay?”

“No, I’m going to talk to him,” she firmly responded.

“Ma don’t,” I pleaded some more. “That man has lost his wife, his daughter, and now his other daughter is in jail for attempted murder. The last thing he needs right now is an angry Hispanic mom yelling at his face. Please.”

I looked over my shoulder and I could see her thinking on it for a while. She wasn’t happy about it I could tell, but eventually she gave in and sighed before standing from the couch to dispose of the bloody cotton balls.

“I’ll call the school to let them know you’re off for the rest of the week,” she said.

“No I can’t, I have to go,” I opposed.

“Remiro, you’ve been stabbed four times.”

“And I’ll get stabbed four more times by Amir if I leave him to do that Chemistry lab on his own. Besides, it was only a piece of glass,” I tried reasoning.

“Remiro…”

“Ma, I’ll be fine. I promise,” I assured her.

Truthfully, the Chem lab was not the real reason I wanted to go back, I couldn’t care less about that stupid project. I had just gotten off of a break where not much of anything eventful really happened, and there’s something about reuniting with your friends after taking a pause from the debilitating nature of school that feels so euphoric when you’re forced to go back and go through that soul-sucking experience together all over again. Especially then when I was approaching graduation, I wanted to be able to

cherish as much of that high school experience as I could with the people I cared about. Plus, I knew it'd be nice to be there for when they laughed and joked about how I almost fucking died.

"You're just as stubborn as your…" my mother began to say, but left her sentence unfinished.

I knew who she was referring to, the man she never liked to speak about. And in that moment, something that Pauline said in the locker room regarding my father came back to mind. It left me to wonder.

"Did he ever have strange dreams?" I asked.

My mother shut off the sink as she was in the middle of washing her hands.

"Who?" she asked back.

"Dad," I replied.

She stepped out of the kitchen and I could see that expression in her face, the one she'd give to make me choose my next words wisely.

"Your father was a terrible man, you know I don't like talking about him," she made clear.

"I know but-"

"Not another word," she commanded, to which I obeyed.

Thankfully, the doorbell saved me with a ring. My mother walked over to the front door and opened it to reveal Sydney, Desmond and Amir standing outside. It wasn't

uncommon for them to come by, and after what had happened to me at school, it wasn't much of a surprise. So they said their hellos and stepped in. My mother quickly warmed up whatever she could in the fridge and served it to us all. She was a meal prepper in that way, the result of having to work on call.

The five of us sat at the dining table and had some good laughs. Some of my best memories come from that table with all of us there together. Many memories.

"This tastes amazing Miss Mejias," Amir complimented.

"Thank you Amir," my mother responded.

"Yeah it reminds me of the five-star restaurant we went to in Colorado," Desmond added.

"Oh my God, this guy and that damn summer trip," I stated in exhaustion.

"I told you it never ends," Sydney remarked.

"What? It was really good," Desmond continued.

"Not another word about Colorado, please," I mandated.

"Alright alright that's my last one," he promised.

I held my chuckles back as best I could, as it did cause me pain from the stabbings, and I guess Amir caught on to that eventually.

"How are you feeling Remiro?" Amir asked.

I shrugged.

“It hurts a little when I move but…I’m doing okay, thanks to Sydney for saving my life.”

She and I exchanged bright smiles. I really was grateful that she had my back, as per usual.

“That girl Pauline is crazy,” my mother chimed in.

“I don’t understand what could drive someone to do something like that,” Desmond added.

“Did she say why she attacked you?” Amir asked me directly.

I took a moment to conjure up my response, because I knew how stupid it would sound.

“She said that I was the spawn of Charlie Charlie.”

And as I anticipated, they all exchanged bewildered expressions as though I were speaking Chinese.

“You’re kidding right?” Sydney asked.

“No,” I insisted. “She said a whole bunch of random things like ‘after all these years we have finally found you again’ or some shit like that.”

“Who’s we?” the questions kept rolling.

“I don’t know, I didn’t get a chance to ask,” I replied.

“Why’d you meet with her in the locker room in the first place?” Desmond probed.

I prepared an answer in my head, but knowing how much more ridiculous it might sound, I backed out from giving a proper answer.

“Doesn’t matter anymore, it was stupid,” I replied.

My mother then scanned the table and the empty dishes we had.

“Looks like everyone’s finished eating. I’ll start cleaning.”

“Need any help?” I offered.

“No I got it. You rest,” she said.

My mother then collected the dishes and took them to the sink to wash.

“Speaking of Charlie Charlie, did you know he was a real person?” Amir brought up.

“There was a real man whose real name was Charlie Charlie?” Desmond asked in disbelief.

“Yeah. I wanted to see what the inspiration was behind the game so I did some digging. Apparently back in the year 1718, Charlie Charlie was lynched somewhere in the Santa Fe Forest for committing some very nasty crimes,” Amir explained.

“Santa Fe Forest is less than an hour from here,” Sydney pointed out.

“Yup. Turns out a lot of executions took place out there during Spain’s occupation of New Mexico,” Amir educated us.

“What was he charged for?” Desmond asked.

“Pfft,” reacted Amir, “what wasn’t he charged for? Rape, theft, mass murders, arson, child abuse. There’s a couple of excerpts I found that referred to him as the Devil’s favorite man.”

Before we could learn anymore from Amir, the doorbell rang. Seeing how my mother was busy, I volunteered to get it.

“No you sit down,” my mother demanded.

“I got it Ma,” I stubbornly opposed, to which she responded by sucking her teeth and probably murmuring something under her breath.

I grabbed onto the door’s knob, and upon opening it I was shocked to see a familiar face. Mister Bohannon.

“Evening Remiro,” he said.

I quickly looked over to where my mother was. She was still focused on washing dishes in the sink.

“Who is it Remiro?” she asked without looking.

“She’s going to kill you if she sees you,” I warned Mister Bohannon. “Move, outside.”

I shoved him out and away from the doorway before shutting the door behind me.

“What are you doing here?” I interrogated.

“I came to check on you, see how you’re doing,” he replied. “I’m terribly sorry for what Pauline did. Please forgive her, she’s very unwell.”

“Sorry Mister Bohannon but I’m gonna have a real hard time forgiving someone who just tried to kill me,” I said.

“I understand, and again, I apologize,” he stated in a genuine manner. “Did she by any chance say…why?”

“Why she attacked me?” I asked to clarify.

He nodded. I wasn’t sure why that mattered, but this was his daughter we were talking about so I assumed he simply wanted to try to make sense of it all.

“Everything she said was nothing but nonsense Mister Bohannon. Like you said, she’s very unwell,” I restated.

“Yes but surely there’s some kind of a reasonable explanation,” he said.

That kind of left me dumbfounded. I think any sensible father would understand that there is nothing reasonable about trying to kill someone.

“For trying to murder me?” I stated in an outburst.

“What was it that she told you son?” he asked.

“Okay, I think it’s time for you to go,” I demanded.

“Did she ask about your dreams?”

My heart must have skipped a beat or two, and my thoughts were left scrambling in an unknown field. How could he know?

“You’ve seen him in your dreams, haven’t you?” he pried. “The four-horned demon?”

I took a step back out of the sheer shock of his accuracy and stumbled over my own footing, but before I could fall, Mister Bohannon grabbed a hold of my arm.

“Answer the question son,” he ordered.

Before I could think to come up with a response, the front door barged open and out came an angry Hispanic mother.

“What the fuck are you doing!?” she shouted.

“Audrina, good evening,” Mister Bohannon said in a calm demeanor.

“Get out!” she demanded.

“I only came by to say sorry,” Mister Bohannon fibbed.

“Great, you’ve said it, now get the fuck out. Now!”

Mister Bohannon nodded his head and gave off a little smile. He then walked back over to his neighboring home. My mother grabbed me and took me inside, bombarding me with questions as to what we were talking about. I quickly constructed a lie that was believable enough to make her back off and not worry, though I didn’t tell her anything about the four-horned demon. It was very disturbing hearing Mister Bohannon speak of it with the tone that he did. I never saw him that serious before, he was always a jolly character, a friendly neighbor. I was frightened, deeply frightened, but expressing that to a mother that might not understand was not something I wanted to deal with. I needed to uncover this mystery myself, but I had no way of knowing where to start…until Wednesday came along.

## Chapter 4

# Wednesday

I had a dream during the night, the same dream as before. Clouded skies, harmonic humming, a space within the forest that's absent of trees and flowers. This time around however, I managed to gain a bit of lucid control as I walked up to one of the stone monolith pillars to observe it closely, and what I found was a familiar symbol. A crescent moon split down the middle with three lines of different lengths stacked to the side. It was the same symbol tatted on Pauline's ankle, which finally answered my question as to where I had seen it before.

And as I continued looking at this engraving, I was met with the well-acquainted stomach churn that stripped me of my lucid control and forced me to turn around and notice the four-horned figure watching from afar. Despite having been through this plenty of times already, I never do get used to the terror set upon me in that moment.

I woke up that Wednesday morning in an abrupt manner, breathing heavily. With the crescent symbol still sharp in my mind, I jumped out of bed and rummaged through the desk by my window. I had folders upon folders of old drawings spanning all the way to the ones made when I was 5, but I had no interest in any of those. I searched through

them all until I came across the one I was looking for, a drawing of the monoliths in my dream. The symbols on the stone pillars were drawn in great detail, including the one shaped in a crescent moon. I was ecstatic, and with this drawing in hand I quickly dressed myself for school and biked my way to class. Knowing how well Amir was at deep-dive researching, I figured he was my best bet at uncovering the meanings of the inscriptions on the pillars. I waited anxiously throughout the first two periods of classes to see him again at Chem, and when I finally presented him the drawing…

"I don't understand what I'm looking at here," he stated with a perplexed expression.

"Remember the recurring dreams I mentioned yesterday?" I tried reminding him. "This is it."

"This is what you see in your dreams?" he asked.

"Yes. I've seen it so many times that I was able to memorize everything and sketch it all down, including these symbols," I explained.

"What do they mean?" he asked further.

"I don't know. I was hoping you would be able to tell me, specifically this one," I said pointing at the crescent symbol. "When Pauline had that seizure on Monday, I noticed this exact symbol tatted on her ankle."

"Remmy it's not uncommon for someone to dream about something they've seen a couple of days ago," Amir tried educating.

“I didn’t draw this today Amir, I drew this four years ago.”

That got him interested and amazed, and left him at a loss for words.

“Why don’t you and I hit up the library when this class is over?” I suggested.

“Can’t it wait until after school?” Amir pleaded.

“I spent my whole life trying to find the meaning behind this dream. I don’t want to wait any longer,” I asserted.

“I don’t know Remmy, I’ve got AP Calc after this and I’m barely passing.”

“I need you Amir,” I insisted. “There is no one better at historical research than you. Please man.”

Amir thought about it some more, and though he was clearly worried about his grades at Calc, I could tell deep down he really did want to explore the origins of the symbols. And so when the bell rang, he and I took a trip to the library. It wasn’t so much the books we were interested in but the computers that required a VPN to bypass their internet censorships. I tried assisting Amir initially in his research, but after realizing how unhelpful my efforts were, I left him on his own and sat on one of the tables to wait. I hadn’t been at the library all that often, it always gave off a humdrum vibe with all the students quietly reading or studying.

But that day, there was a group of students at the table across from me that weren’t so quiet. They were making quite a bit of a ruckus, and when I looked over to see why, I could see them fooling around as they played the dreaded Charlie Charlie Challenge.

The pencil would move on its own and the group would freak out as a result. It got to the point where the Librarian had to approach this group and ask them to leave. The group was annoyed with the Librarian and muttered some nasty words just loud enough for her and I to hear before exiting the library. But right as they left their table, I captured a clear line of sight at another student sat at the far end of the room. Toby was his name, and he had his head tilted back with his eyes rolled up, much like Pauline did on Monday. It was a very concerning sight, but before I could think to do anything about it, SLAM! Amir dropped a stack of papers onto my table, which made me jump from startlement.

"You won't believe what I found," he said.

Before I could entertain his findings, I looked back over in Toby's direction but saw that he had quickly gotten up from his seat and exited the library. I wasn't sure if my mind was playing tricks on me and what I saw before was fabricated, but he did look completely fine and there was no seizure, so I didn't assume much of it.

"Remmy, you good?" Amir asked after noticing my attention wander elsewhere.

"Yeah…yeah I'm good. What'd you find?"

"A goldmine," he exclaimed with a smile.

Amir took his stack of papers and spread the sheets across the table. All of them were printed articles from local historical archives and records.

“At first I thought these might be Egyptian hieroglyphs, but I couldn’t find a resemblance so I kept digging. Eventually I came across an old excerpt consisting of some of these symbols and more similar to them. It’s a hidden language that’s so secluded and secretive, it doesn’t even have a name.”

“Okay. Were you able to translate any of it?” I asked.

“Some of it. The symbols are ideographical, almost like Chinese characters,” he explained as he pointed at some of the symbols. “This one means Earth…this one means leader…I think this one means resurrection.”

I then pointed at the crescent symbol.

“What about this one?”

“That one isn’t necessarily a word, but rather a title,” Amir led. “It’s what represents a group of people that very few historical records refer to as the Caelum People. Caelum is actually Latin for sky or heaven.”

“What were they, some kind of cult?” I pressed further.

“Hard to say. None of the archives or local records go into detail on who they are. They just existed at one point in time. But what I find interesting is that here on your drawing,” he stated as he pointed at the symbol sketched right next to the crescent moon, “the symbol shares a row with another. It took me a good while to find out what it means, but I’m fairly certain it’s something related to the word ‘resist’. So if we put these two symbols together as they are drawn, we get ‘resist Caelum People.’”

I took a moment to digest the information given before proceeding with another round of questions.

“So is Pauline a member of these…Caelum People?”

“I don’t know, maybe?” Amir answered. “I’m as confused and intrigued as you are…but there’s more.”

Amir grabbed a blank sheet of paper and a pencil. I thought he was getting ready to set up the Charlie Charlie Challenge again, but instead he handed them both to me.

“You said you’ve memorized everything in that dream of yours, right?” he asked.

“Uh, basically, yeah,” I confirmed. “Why?”

“I want you to draw the positions of every monolith from a bird’s-eye view to the best of your ability,” he instructed. “I’ve got a theory.”

And as he went on to explain his theory further, I did what I was told and drew the monolith positions accordingly.

“As I was looking into this, I found that some of the symbols looked familiar, and then I realized I’ve seen a few of them before. There was this journal I found while I was researching the origins of the Charlie Charlie Challenge. It belonged to one of Charlie’s followers. Most of it was boring gibberish, but there was one symbol that kept popping up over and over again.”

Amir then took my roughly finished sketch and matched it side by side with the journal entry. The monoliths in my drawing were positioned in the shape of the symbol drawn in the journal entry.

“The symbol representing the Gehenna People. The word Gehenna is Latin for hell. I believe Charlie Charlie and his followers were members of this group,” Amir stated.

I took another moment to digest this new information as I rummaged through my hair. It was a bit overwhelming, yet at the same time not enough.

“Amazing isn’t it?” Amir continued. “It’s all tying into Charlie Charlie.”

“I…I don’t even know what to say. So much is connected to one another yet nothing makes sense,” I said.

“Yeah, I know what you mean,” Amir acknowledged. “I could take another in-depth look at everything I found but I doubt it’s going to answer any of our questions.”

I figured he was right. It felt like one of those connect-the-dots drawings except we were missing a couple of numbers…but I had an idea on where I might find them.

“You’re right,” I agreed with Amir, “but I know someone who will.”

I got up from the table and grabbed my belongings to leave the library.

“Where are you going?” Amir questioned.

“Ditching school early,” I responded. “I’m gonna go try to talk to Pauline.”

“Are you fucking insane?” Amir nearly shouted. “She tried to kill you, not to mention she’s in police custody.”

“She’s got a tattoo of the Caelum symbol on her ankle. There might be something she knows that the records don’t have,” I clarified.

“You’re not listening Remmy. Police have her in custody, they won’t let you speak to her.”

“I have to try,” I asserted.

Amir was left in disbelief but I had no time to explain myself any further. I was determined to find the elusive answers to my questions, and if that meant doing something rather foolish then I was prepared to act a fool. I left the school building right before lunch began, and I mounted my bike and set a course to the police station. My plan was to ask nicely to see her at first, but if that proved fruitless which I was honestly counting on, I’d come up with a different way like bailing her out or sneaking letters into her cell. Regardless, like all of the plans I ever make, things tend to result in the one outcome I never anticipated on happening.

As I arrived at the police station, I noticed a bunch of police officers rushing out of the building, hopping into their vehicles and speeding off with the sirens blaring. It felt like something big was going on but I wasn’t sure what, so I continued into the station. I came across the front desk person who was frantically combing through documents as more police officers ran past to leave the building.

“Hi, I’m here to speak to Pauline Bohannon?” I timidly spoke.

“She isn’t in the station right now,” the front desk person uttered without looking up.

“What?” I said, taken aback.

The front desk person then looked at me and squinted.

“Are you family?” she asked.

I then thought about how hospitals generally restrict visits to immediate family, and figured things might work the same way here.

“I’m her brother,” I fibbed.

“Okay well she’s just escaped from her holding cell,” the front desk person informed. “We’ve got our best officers locating her now.”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. I wanted to ask more, but the front desk person was called over by a coworker who needed her elsewhere. How does a young woman as frail as Pauline escape a police station? Did she slip through the jail bars?

After seeing two more officers leave the precinct, I decided to follow where they were going by tailing them with my bike. They went on much quicker than I ever could, but the blaring sirens still led me the rest of the way. In the end, I saw quite a few police cars huddled below a small bridge that hovered over the road. There was a large crowd of people standing about, along with a news crew. I got a phone call as I was approaching the scene, and looked to see Amir’s name on the caller ID.

“Hello?” I picked up.

“Did you hear the news Remmy?” Amir asked.

“Not right now Amir, I’m in the middle of chasing Pauline down.”

“What?” he exclaimed.

“She got out of police custody but I think they’ve got her in cuffs again. Patrol cars came to a stop,” I explained.

“Remmy, she’s dead” Amir said.

“The fuck are you talking about,” I replied as I dismounted my bike.

“Pauline…she’s dead.”

And as I joined in with the crowd of people, I spotted what Amir was talking about, and what everyone else, including the news camera, was looking at. Hanging off of the guard rail of the small bridge above that crossed over the road was Pauline’s deceased body. The noose of a rope gripped onto her neck as she dangled in place. It was a shocking and horrific sight, one that I couldn’t stomach for long, so I went to fetch my bike and leave as quickly as I could. But then I stopped myself when a thought came to mind, a memory of a story I was told when I was a kid. Before I was born, my father was imprisoned for the harm he inflicted on the family. But then he somehow managed to break out, and pretty soon afterwards he was found dead by police, hanging at the end of a noose off of a balcony. Of course, it could have been just a coincidence that such a specific set of events managed to occur once again, but I wasn’t fully convinced of this, so I stuck around for a couple of hours to learn what I could.

As the sun approached the horizon, Desmond's car came rolling up to the scene. He, Sydney and Amir then hopped out and rushed over to me.

"Oh my God Remmy are you okay?" Sydney asked as she hugged me.

"I'm fine," I replied.

"Did the police say anything?" asked Amir.

I pointed to two individuals in the distance as I referred to them.

"Chief of police doesn't know how she got out of her cell, and the medical examiner is ruling this as a suicide."

"A suicide?" Desmond stated in disbelief. "Who breaks out of jail just to kill themself?"

"I don't know," I admitted. "None of it is making any sense. The strangest part is the same exact thing happened to my father. Broke out of prison, found dead with a noose around his neck, chalked up to a suicide."

"That can't be a coincidence…can it?" Amir questioned.

He and I looked at each other, because knowing what we knew about Caelum and the connections to Charlie Charlie, we were both viewing this situation from a rather different perspective.

"Like I said, I don't know," I replied.

I then made my way back over to my blue bicycle.

"Where are you going?" Amir asked.

“Home. I’m feeling tired,” I called back.

“We’re coming with you,” Sydney said.

“No no, you guys go on I’ll be fine,” I assured.

“Remmy,” she began with an assertive tone, “you saw a dead body for the first time in your life today. Don’t push us away, let us support you.”

“I’ll be fine, I promise,” I reiterated. “We’ll talk more tomorrow.”

I then hopped onto my bike and sped off. In truth, it would have been nice to have my friends be by my side at that moment, but that would have required me to explain everything that Amir and I knew and all of the thoughts and theories that I had listed in my head. I wasn’t sure I was ready to share any of that just yet. I wanted to wait for when the time was right, when I knew just a little more.

The sun was beginning to dip as I made it back home. I had planned to do some more research on the monolith symbols myself, but that changed when I noticed a police vehicle right outside of the Bohannon residence. Two police officers were banging on Mister Bohannon’s front door, but they received no response.

“You think he’s home?” one asked the other.

“Nah,” replied the other. “Car’s not in the driveway, probably still at work. Let’s check back in a few hours.”

The two officers then mounted back into their vehicle and drove off. I examined the scene myself and noticed that although Mister Bohannon’s car was not in the driveway,

I could see the old sedan with its bright pink rims parked on the street instead. Mister Bohannon must have been at home, and so I approached his front door, and knocked.

"Mister Bohannon?" I began. "It's your next door neighbor Remiro."

I received no answer just as the officers did.

"I know you're home Mister Bohannon. I can see your car parked out in the street. We need to talk about your daughter Pauline."

I waited for a while, and for a brief second I thought he might not actually be at home, but then I heard footsteps approaching from inside, and soon after, the front door opened with Mister Bohannon stood by the doorway. He invited me inside and offered me tea or something to eat, but I politely declined as I wasn't here for that. When he took a seat across from me, I mustered up the courage to tell him about what happened to Pauline.

"Mister Bohannon…I don't know how else to say this but-"

"Pauline is dead. I know son, I saw the news," he said.

I probably should have figured that he might have seen the news already, as pretty much everyone at school was watching it live during lunch hours, but as I observed Mister Bohannon's demeanor further, he didn't express any remorse or sadness.

"You don't look so upset by that," I pointed out.

"I knew what I was getting into when I brought her into this world," he stated. "There's always going to be a target on our backs."

I didn't quite understand as his words were a bit cryptic, until he lowered his sock to scratch an itch, partially revealing the crescent-shaped tattoo on his ankle. I instantly recognized it, and Mister Bohannon caught onto that.

"Seen it before?" he asked.

I nodded.

"Pauline had that same tattoo."

"That she did," he acknowledged. "So did her sister Samantha, and so did their mother."

Mister Bohannon then leaned in a bit closer.

"But you've also seen it elsewhere, haven't you?"

I nodded again.

"In a dream of mine."

Mister Bohannon smiled a bit, then began to laugh as if I had told him something funny.

"God damn it I knew it," he exclaimed. "We've been looking all over for you for so damn long."

Those words were nearly identical to what Pauline had said in the locker room.

"Pauline said something similar, something about losing me years ago?" I revealed.

Mister Bohannon nodded slowly.

“Long time ago, there was this devilish man named Charlie Charlie. Our people, Caelum,” he said as he flashed his tattoo again, “executed him, but not before he made a pact with the Devil to return. See, the Devil likes to keep the bad people down in hell, they are his favorite to torture, but if he’s offered a deal that sounds appealing to him, he’ll reconsider. He’s a bargain hunter in that way, and Charlie offered him something so valuable he simply could not refuse. Souls, but not just one…millions upon millions, enough to replace Charlie’s place in hell. You’ve seen his work already, the viral challenge circulating around the internet.”

“The pencil game?” I asked for clarification.

“It might seem like just a game son, but it’s not. It’s a ruse. When you play that game and ask Charlie a question, you officially hand him a ticket to your soul without even knowing it. That simple interaction grants him ownership, and once he’s got a grasp on your soul, he won’t let go…not until he has enough and not until the birth of his 10th generational child. Unfortunately, it seems like we failed to stop the latter.”

I took note of the delivery of that final sentence as he alluded to me.

“What, me?” I asked. “You think I’m his 10th generational child?”

“I’m pretty damn sure of it,” Mister Bohannon expressed with confidence. “During World War II, Gehenna placed your bloodline into hiding and we lost track of the following generations. We deduced that the 10th descendant would be born somewhere between the late 90s and now. You fall into that range, and your dreams confirm that

you are of his bloodline. Only his descendants receive those particular callings, secondary callings we call them. Primary callings are much worse."

"What's a primary calling?"

He leaned in a bit closer.

"The ones he sends to the weak and vulnerable. Charlie manipulates them, promising to fill the empty void inside only if they submit to him. I told you of Samantha's passing, how much it broke Pauline. Those seizures you saw her have with her eyes rolled back…that's a primary calling."

I had to take a second to rub my eyes, and if I could rub against my brain I would have, because I was finding it hard to believe.

"I'm having trouble processing all this shit at once," I said. "It all sounds so…"

"Ridiculous?" he finished my sentence. "Yeah…that's why it's gone on for so long, nearly three God damn centuries later. Every one of your ancestors thought it all sounded too damn stupid to be true, but it's real. Charlie is real, and he will return to claim your body as his own if we do not stop him."

I looked into his eyes to see if he was kidding. There wasn't a glint of humor, no essence of sarcasm in his tone.

"How do we stop him?" I entertained.

Mister Bohannon took a deep breath in and out. I got the feeling that he figured I wouldn't like the answer.

“After the 10th generational child is born, Charlie is allowed to return to the surface only if he has collected enough souls for the Devil. Once that happens, everyone who has played the game will die all at once, and all that time he spent in hell will make him an unstoppable demonic force wreaking havoc across the world. There’s no stopping him from reaching more souls, that damn video made sure of that. The only way to prevent his return…is by killing off his direct bloodline.

“The fuck!?” I exclaimed.

“The birth of the 10th generation grants him the ability to possess anyone in his lineage”, he explained. “You and everyone directly related to you would have to die to prevent that from happening.”

I stood up from my seat and took a couple of steps away from him, realizing then why it was that Pauline attacked me in the locker room and how Mister Bohannon might stage an attempt to do the same.

“Relax kid,” he calmly stated. “If I was going to kill you I’d be dead already. You’ve got guardian angels that’ll end me and make it look like I slipped on a banana peel if I tried anything.”

Mister Bohannon pointed out the window, towards the line of trees outside. I briefly took a look but couldn’t see anyone out there.

“You don’t see them, but they’re there, always watching, always protecting the bloodline,” Mister Bohannon assured. “That’s why Pauline couldn’t kill you, they got to her before she could.”

“No, it was my friend who stopped Pauline,” I corrected him.

“Gehenna will disguise themselves as the closest people in your inner circle just to keep an eye on you. Ask yourself this, how did your friend know Pauline had you trapped in that locker room?”

I had to think on that question for a moment before asking it to myself again in my mind. How did Sydney know? I did tell her I’d be there, but could it be a coincidence that she showed up right when Pauline nearly killed me? There’s that word again…coincidence.

“So Pauline’s suicide…”

“Wasn’t a suicide,” Mister Bohannon answered. “They did to her what they do to all us Caelum, and anyone who helps us. They’ll do the same to me the moment you walk out those doors.”

I had to sit back down, there was too much for me to process standing up.

“Remiro,” Mister Bohannon continued, “it’s important that you understand how serious I am about this. It’s more than just the lives of millions at stake, it’s the whole world. I know this is unfair, but we can’t stop Charlie Charlie unless the bloodline

dies…and that means you as well. It also means that you're the one who's gonna have to do it."

"What?" I blurted out.

"Gehenna won't be expecting it, especially if you do it quick. When a demon possesses a body, they share that body with that person's soul, corrupting it and taking control. But if that body carries no soul then there isn't anything to corrupt, and therefore nothing to control. There is nothing that Charlie Charlie can do if you are dead."

I opened my mouth to retaliate, but there weren't any words that came out, they were lost along with my thoughts.

"I don't take no pleasure in asking some kid to die for the rest of us," Mister Bohannon continued, "but if it ain't you then it's a million other kids. The fate of everyone's lives is at stake here son."

I contemplated my options as well as what to say. Mister Bohannon knew it was a lot for me to process, I could see the understanding in his slow nods.

"You've given me a lot of information all at once," I finally said. "I don't know how much of it is true, I don't know if any of it is true…I need time to process it all."

I then stood up and made my way towards the door.

"Don't take too much time Remiro, there's not a lot of it left."

And right as I exited the home, Mister Bohannon gave off a final warning.

“Remember what I said about your friend! Not everyone is who they seem to be!”

I slammed the door shut behind me. It’s not so much that I didn’t believe in what he was saying, I more so didn’t want it to be true, because if it was, then that would mean that everything I knew about the world, and my past, and my relationship with Sydney was completely wrong. I know I said I was prepared to act a fool, but not to be a fool.

That night, I sat by my desk by the bedroom window, but rather than drawing I instead scoured the internet with my HP laptop looking for any more information that I could find regarding Caelum, Gehenna and demons. I came across an article that spoke about Lilith, which according to certain religions was arguably Adam’s first wife. But when Lilith refused to be subservient to him, she became a demon or succubus of sorts, though this narrative is different depending on the religion. Nonetheless, there seemed to be a way for a human soul to transform into something demonic, whether it’d be the result of a punishment or the result of one’s own evil acts, though many other articles stated that it was impossible for demons to have been human beings beforehand. And as I continued researching, most articles agreed that demons could only grow stronger by their ranking or by the number of souls they’ve consumed, except for one article which suggested that the passage of time in hell made them more refined, and therefore more powerful. In short, I didn’t find anything useful, and eventually I asked myself if I truly believed any of it to be real.

My cell phone rang before I could come up with an answer. I read Sydney's name on the screen, likely calling to simply check in. Before I could pick up the call, I noticed a faint flash of red and blue lights coming from outside the window. I took a peek and saw the police officers from earlier in the day returning to the Bohannon residence. I had to quietly open the window and pop my head out to see one of the officers knock on the door as the other shined a flashlight through the windows.

"Santa Fe Police Department!" one officer announced. "Mister Bohannon, are you in there!?"

The second officer continued panning the flashlight around until he spotted something through the window. He stepped closer to get a clearer view, then jumped back.

"Holy shit!" he shouted. "Is that a body? I think I see him hanging on the ceiling fan!"

The other officer came rushing to the window to see for himself, then called it in through the radio.

"Dispatch I need a paramedic over at our location immediately."

I quickly backed away from the window. *There's no way, right?* I thought. I then grabbed some shoes, as well as a hat to look a bit more inconspicuous I guess. By the time I stepped out of the house and walked over to the Bohannon residence, an ambulance had already arrived, and the front door had been kicked down. The police

officers accompanied the paramedics as they rolled Mister Bohannon's deceased body on a stretcher to load him into the ambulance. A white tarp covered his face and body, but his tatted ankle was exposed just enough for me to confirm it was him. I was in complete shock and extremely petrified, because I finally realized that there may have been some truth in Mister Bohannon's words. It was beginning to feel real, and my God that was a terrible feeling.

I then turned around to face the thick line of trees stood under the night. It was difficult to tell if there was anyone staring back at me through the darkness, and that made it all the more unnerving. One question continuously persisted to bounce around the walls in my head all throughout that night and into the following day, and I wasn't so sure I was looking forward to finding an answer. Who can I trust now?

## Chapter 5

# Thursday

Walking into school that morning was unlike any other morning I had been through before. My third eye was opened, my life had changed entirely, and all around me were people who went about their day completely oblivious as to what was currently taking place. I passed by people I had seen play the Charlie Charlie Challenge before, and passed by people who were talking about it. I passed by a classroom where every student inside was playing the game, and passed by students who were watching the original viral video. It made me uncomfortable knowing that they were handing over their soul to Charlie Charlie without even realizing, and it felt worse knowing what I was expected to do to save them.

"Remmy!" I heard from across the hall.

I turned around to see Sydney walk up to me. After my conversation with Mister Bohannon, I couldn't view her the same way anymore. She and I had been friends for so long, but I wondered how many of those years were actually real.

"You didn't answer any of my calls last night," she noted.

"I uh…I was busy," which wasn't a complete lie.

“Doing what?” she probed.

I remember being genuinely frightened by Sydney, and I hated myself for that but it was only logical to feel that way knowing she very well could have been a Gehenna cult member all this time.

“Remmy are you okay?” she stated after noticing how off I was.

I put on a fake smile.

“Yeah…yeah I’m good. I should really get to class now.”

“I’ll walk with you there,” she offered.

“No!” I said a bit too harshly. “No, I’m good. I’ll uh, see you at lunch or something.”

She was very confused. She knew there was something awry.

“…okay. You sure you’re alright?” she asked.

“Yup, all good,” I falsely assured before hurrying away from Sydney.

I briefly looked back and saw a subtle sadness in her gaze. I never liked seeing her upset, much less disappointed, but I had to remind myself that she may have only been putting on a show to inflict these emotions upon me. And as I continued to walk while distracted, I accidentally bumped into the janitor and dropped his bundle of garbage bags from his hands. I quickly apologized before scurrying off and slipping into Chem class.

Amir gave me my pair of latex gloves and goggles as he normally did, and I took them with trembling hands. He witnessed as they continued to quiver while I tried putting on the gloves.

"You sure you're doing okay Remmy? You look skittish," he said.

"Two days left until the lab is due, so let's cut the chit-chat and get to work!" said the wonderful Chem teacher before slumping back down behind his desk.

"My neighbor is dead," I spoke in a low voice.

"Yeah I know," Amir acknowledged. "Seeing Pauline like that must've been difficult."

"No Amir, her dad Mister Bohannon is dead."

"Wait what?" he replied in shock. "What happened?"

"Same thing that happened to Pauline," I answered. "I talked to him a couple of hours before he died and he told me so much shit about Charlie Charlie…I'm still trying to wrap my head around all of it. Part of me thought it could just be old man nonsense, but seeing his body being rolled out on a stretcher last night…I'm starting to think this shit's real."

Amir nodded, then looked to his left and to his right to ensure nobody else was close enough to listen to our conversation.

"I'm starting to think so too," he agreed.

Amir reached into his backpack and pulled out a file that held documents.

“You said Pauline called you the spawn of Charlie Charlie, right?” he asked.

“Yeah,” I confirmed.

“Here, take a look,” he said as he handed over the file.

I began combing through the documents inside. The first thing I came across was a copy of my father’s birth certificate.

“Why do you have my Dad’s birth certificate?” I questioned. “How’d you even get it?”

“That’s not important, keep looking,” Amir advised.

I looked through the rest of the documents. There were obituaries, death certificates, family letters, marriage records, literally everything related to my ancestors.

“These are old family records. My family records,” I recognized.

“Obituaries, legal documents, basically anything I could find for me to draw out your family tree,” Amir corroborated. “Guess who I eventually came across?”

But I didn’t have to guess, as I made it to the final document in the file that contained a portrait of a sinister-looking man, smiling wide. There was a name written at the top of the document.

“Charlie Charlie.”

Amir nodded his head. I was left baffled.

“Now this isn’t as accurate as a DNA test from Ancestry.com, but it’s very likely that you are a descendant of Charlie Charlie. It all links back to him,” Amir demonstrated.

I stared at Charlie Charlie’s portrait long and hard. He had this devilish gaze that complemented his malicious grin. He was pure evil, I could tell.

“Mister Bohannon was right,” I realized. “Charlie’s gonna come back and use my body as his vessel. Only way to stop him is…….I can’t.”

I abruptly took off my goggles and ran out of the classroom. The Chem teacher called out to me but I ignored his meaningless words. I darted down the hall and quickly ran my way into the boys’ restroom as I felt like I might vomit, but when I got there the feeling subsided, and I was left to face my own reflection in the large mirror. The young boy that looked back at me had terror in his eyes. The dreadful thought that millions of people would lose their lives if I didn’t take my own haunted me. It was an unfair burden, one I had never asked for. *Why me*, I thought, *why the fuck me?* Tears welled up in my eyes, driven by stress and fear.

Then the door to the restroom opened. I quickly wiped the tears away and played off my emotions. When I opened my eyes anew, I noticed that it was Toby, the kid from the library, heading towards one of the stalls.

“Toby,” I said.

He stopped in place and looked at me, startled.

“That is your name right? Toby?” I asked.

“Um…yeah, that’s my name,” he verified. “I didn’t think anybody knew it.”

“You were in my Physics class last year,” I recalled. “You took almost a month off of school because your father passed away in a car accident.”

There was an expression of resurfaced grief on his face.

“My condolences,” I continued. “I lost my Dad too, he died before I was born. They said he committed suicide, and I believed that story my entire life. Now, I’m not so sure anymore.”

I stepped closer to Toby.

“You’ve been getting strange dreams lately, haven’t you? Visions maybe?” I questioned.

“H-how’d you know?” Toby replied nervously.

“I saw him call out to you in the library. Your head was tilted back and your eyes rolled up,” I detailed.

“What?”

“What does he want from you Toby?” I pressed on. “Is he telling you to submit to him?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Toby dismissed.

He tried entering the stall but I held out my arm to block his path.

“Listen to me Toby,” I began to warn, “do not pay any attention to the callings. Whatever he’s promising you, it’s all lies.”

“Please get out of my way,” he requested, but I ignored.

“He’s using you to get what he wants, do you understand?”

But rather than listening to my words, Toby tried pushing past me. I could see his hands begin to shake, perhaps out of nerves or by what was about to transpire next.

“Just get out of my way,” he pleaded.

“Toby listen to me damn it!” I demanded.

“GET OUT OF MY WAY!” he shouted hysterically. “GET OUT GET OUT GET OUT GET OUT!”

Toby’s entire body began twitching, as if a thousand pins and needles were poking him from all directions.

“Toby?” I said.

He didn’t respond. His head started to tilt back and his eyes rolled all the way up.

“Toby wake up!” I shouted as I shook him. “You need to fight it, come on, fight!”

I kept shaking him, and when that didn’t work I began smacking him across the face. Nothing I tried seemed to get him to snap out of it.

“Fight back Toby! Fight back, FIGHT BACK!”

Toby then awoke in a gasp and returned to his normal state. His hands trembled and his knees wobbled. He took a few steps away from me.

“Toby?” I said.

“Stay away from me,” he responded, frightened.

“Toby-”

“You stay away,” he commanded, to which I complied.

I watched him leave the restroom, leaving me alone once again, unsure of what to do next. I did however uncover some new information. These primary callings, although they had a strong connection to the mind of the victim, weren’t strong enough to overpower resistance. Toby broke free from that calling, whether that had been through my efforts or through his own, or both, I wasn’t sure. It made me think about Pauline and what she must have done to resist the countless callings she had gotten. I believe much of it had to do with willpower.

When lunch time came around, I spotted Amir already in line and hurried towards him. I went past all the students who threw agitated words in my direction for skipping them and jumped behind Amir.

“Amir, listen to me carefully.”

“Remmy?” he cut me off. “Are you good bro? You left me to do that dilution experiment on my own.”

“Look, we can’t tell Sydney about your research,” I advised.

“Why not?”

“Because I have my suspicions that she might be Gehenna,” I finally confessed out loud.

“Gehenna?” Amir said skeptically. “Remmy you sound deranged.”

“One of the things Mister Bohannon told me before he died was that Gehenna disguises themselves as people close to me to provide protection whenever I’m in trouble. When Pauline tried to kill me, Sydney was there to stop her.”

“Because you told her where you’d be,” Amir reminded, though this I already knew.

“Yeah but I never invited Sydney to come with me,” I explained. “It can’t be some kind of coincidence man, nothing is a coincidence anymore.”

“You seriously think that Sydney, your friend since childhood, has been a member of the Gehenna People this whole time?” Amir asked.

It’s a question I had asked myself many times already, but the answer was still something I was too afraid to acknowledge.

“I think that right now, anything that has a slight chance of being true should be treated as such,” I replied.

“Well why don’t we ask her then?” Amir quipped.

“That’s the worst possible fucking thing we can do,” I opposed.

“I’ll ask her,” Amir stubbornly said.

“Amir, please God damn it, please,” I implored. “If she is who I suspect she might be, I don’t want her knowing that I know. Just keep it to yourself.”

Amir kept quiet for a while, even as we received our lunches.

“Amir,” I pushed.

He then turned to me with one hand behind his back.

“Fine,” he finally said, “I won’t say anything.”

And with that promise being the only thing I had to calm my nerves, I walked with Amir over to Sydney and Desmond’s table. I tried playing it cool as I sat down, but I kept a wary eye on Sydney.

“What’s up my beautiful people,” Amir greeted the pair.

“What’s good Amir. Remmy, you feeling better?” Desmond asked.

“Yeah, little bit,” I replied.

“Alright well, if you ever need someone to talk to, you know we’re always here to help,” he extended.

Sydney then bent forward a bit and squinted her eyes in pain as she rubbed her belly.

“You okay?” Desmond asked.

“Yeah,” she nodded, “it’s just a small contraction. They’ve been getting more frequent lately.”

Sydney then looked up and locked eyes with me.

“Are you challenging me to a staring contest Remmy? You haven’t looked away since you sat down,” she noted.

I held my gaze, examining her, studying. I stared her down, not in awe, but in disillusionment, and I persisted in that stare for a while. It got to the point where I could feel the awkward eyes of Amir and Desmond going from me to each other, then back to me.

“Hey Sydney,” Amir eventually uttered, “I’ve been wondering, what motivated you to go to the girls’ locker room Tuesday after school?”

This question broke my stare on Sydney, and I quickly and sternly looked at Amir who had just promised me he wouldn’t say anything regarding the topic. The bastard must have had his fingers crossed behind his back or something, he wasn’t the type to lie otherwise.

“Amir!” I gritted.

“I just want to know,” he replied.

“I went to the locker room because Remmy said he was going to meet Pauline there,” Sydney answered. “I thought I told you this already.”

“Did Remmy tell you to go with him?” Amir interrogated further.

“Amir stop,” I ordered.

“No,” Sydney responded regardless. “He didn’t even tell me why he was meeting with her, I went to find out. You know I can be a bit of a snoop sometimes.”

That answer was off-putting. Not only did it feel rehearsed to me, but I did recall telling her about the meeting and the purpose for it. I decided to take over for Amir and interrogate Sydney myself.

“No, I did tell you why I was meeting her,” I began clarifying. “I said I asked Pauline a question and that she was gonna give me an answer in the locker room.”

“Yeah but that was a vague answer,” Sydney argued. “When a girl invites a boy to the girl’s locker room, it’s usually to make out with them doofus. I wanted to see you two lovebirds in action. Clearly that didn’t happen.”

I shook my head, then changed my tone.

“I’m not buying that shit,” I gravely stated. “That’s not like you at all.”

“What’s going on?” Desmond chimed in, noticing tension.

“What do you mean that’s not like me?” Sydney defended herself. “I’ve always been nosy, you know that.”

“No there’s a clear difference between being nosy and being somewhere you had no reason to be in to begin with,” I established cold-heartedly.

“Wow, okay…sorry?” Sydney responded offended.

“Why’d you really follow me there Sydney?” I pressed on.

Sydney had an alarmed look on her face, though I wasn’t certain if it was genuine or not.

“I just told you,” she said timidly.

“No tell me the truth Sydney, I want the fucking truth,” I demanded.

“Remmy relax,” Desmond interjected.

“The school day was over,” I persisted. “You could’ve gone home but no, you decided to head to the locker room and for what, to come see what I was doing? Am I supposed to believe that bullshit?”

“You could have died if Sydney didn’t go to check on you,” Desmond stepped in. “She saved your life dude-”

“That’s not the fucking point Desmond!” I shouted in rage.

“Then what is?” Sydney asked with tears in her eyes. “I thought I did the right thing, why am I getting villainized all of a sudden?”

I noticed that I was out of my seat with my fists balled up in anger, though I couldn’t recall at what point I stood up. I also noticed the entirety of the cafeteria staring my way: the students, the lunch ladies, the janitor. I looked over at Desmond who was confused as ever, and then to Amir who looked down in embarrassment. Perhaps I had pushed too far.

“Nothing,” I finally replied. “It’s nothing…sorry.”

I then quickly got myself out of there, walking away from the table without looking back. I was set to have Art right after lunch so I left school early to save myself from a re-encounter with Sydney. As I biked through the urban streets once more, there seemed to be more people playing and talking about the Charlie Charlie Challenge than

there were at the beginning of the week. There was even a newspaper stand with the Charlie Charlie Challenge printed on the front pages. It reminded me of the twisted burden that was bestowed upon me, and so when I came across a hardware store, I stopped to observe the rope samples of varying materials and sizes displayed behind the front glass. I went and bought 50 feet of the cheapest kind, though I tugged on it a bit to make sure the sturdiness wasn't affected by the price.

When I came home, I found my mother asleep on the couch again. She had the blanket down to her knees, and so I walked over and tucked her in a bit better, as I usually did.

"I'm so sorry for what I'm about to do, but it's the only way…I love you," I whispered.

I then gave her a kiss on the forehead. Knowing how light of a sleeper she was, part of me wanted her to wake up and stop me from what I was about to do, but she remained asleep, and so I took that as a sign that I must go through with the plan.

I walked up the stairs and into my room. I pulled the rope I had bought from the hardware store out of my backpack. I then tied the rope up to my ceiling fan and made a noose at the end. I then stood under the rope with a chair beneath my feet. I placed the noose around my neck and took some deep breaths. These were the last breaths I thought I'd ever take, so I cherished them. End of the road.

But right when I was about to kick the chair out from under my feet, the doorbell rang. I wondered who could possibly be coming to the house at this time, so I removed the noose from my neck and went down the stairs. There I saw my mother open the door to reveal Sydney, Desmond and Amir standing outside. They had cut school to chase after me.

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

“I told them everything,” Amir timidly responded, knowing he had promised otherwise.

“You what?” I began to reprimand.

“You should have told us sooner!” Sydney exclaimed.

She shoved me away in anger, but then quickly pulled me back into her arms for a hug, where she held a tight grasp around me.

“Amir showed us his Charlie Charlie research,” Desmond explained. “I don’t think I understand it all, but it makes sense for the most part. I believe it.”

Sydney pulled away from the hug to look into my eyes.

“And I swear to you I’m not some kind of weird cult member or whatever. I’m your friend Remmy, always have been,” she promised.

There were tears welling up in her eyes again, and in that moment, though I still wasn’t sure if I could trust her or not, I didn’t care. If she was Gehenna then so be it, but I needed my friend back and so I hugged her once more.

“I’m sorry, what’s going on,” my mother jumped in.

We then spent an hour or two sat around the dining table getting everyone up to speed, going over everything that Amir and I knew as well as the things we didn’t. I however withheld the suicidal bit of information, though it was only a matter of time before I’d have to talk about it.

“So let me get this straight,” Desmond began to ask for clarification for like the 20th time, “Charlie Charlie made a deal with the Devil to come back to Earth, correct?”

“Yes,” I replied.

“And he needs to pay the Devil with all the souls he’s collected from the people who played the game?”

“That’s right,” I confirmed.

“Shit…I played that damn game,” Desmond realized.

“I played it too,” Amir added.

“So at any moment now I could just…drop dead?” asked Desmond.

I nodded my head, and there was fear in everyone’s eyes.

“Jesus,” Desmond muttered.

“But there’s a way to stop him though, right?” Amir finally brought up. “That’s what you said in Chemistry.”

I took a moment to prepare the right combination of words.

“Charlie Charlie can only possess his descendants, and he is only permitted to do so after the birth of his 10th generational child. I am that 10th generation. The only way to stop him would be to eradicate the bloodline.”

They all looked at me with wide stares.

“…does that mean-”

“Killing me, yes,” I answered Desmond.

I briefly looked over at my mother and she looked especially shocked. I couldn’t bear to witness her expression for very long.

“Who else is left in your bloodline?” Desmond asked. “Your Dad? Grandparents?”

I looked to Desmond as though this was something he should already know, then I looked to Sydney.

“He doesn’t know, I never told him,” she said.

I then reluctantly looked at my mother again, this time with pity. She got up and exited the room, knowing what topic I was about to bring up. I took a deep breath in, then sighed it out to prepare to speak of my father.

“It’s just me left. I used to have grandparents, aunts, uncles, even cousins. I also had a father. My Mom says he was a kind man in the beginning…but one day he snapped. He went on a murdering spree, killing his father, his siblings, their children. He even tried to kill my mother who was pregnant with me at the time. Police got to

him before he could and he was sent to prison. But not too long after, he was found dead like I told you before. Chalked up to a suicide."

"Audrina doesn't like talking or hearing about it," Sydney added for me, "so keep it to yourself."

Desmond nodded, then shook his head in disbelief.

"This whole thing is so fucked dude. There's no way you have to take your own life to save ours, there's gotta be another way."

"There isn't Desmond," I demoralized the room. "There isn't."

But as I was rehashing the past, Amir was looking through the historical records he had collected throughout his research, and eventually, he came across something.

"Hang on, you might be in luck," he claimed.

Amir laid out the records of my ancestors across the table for the four of us to see.

"If Charlie Charlie has to wait for the birth of his 10th descendant, he's gonna have to wait a whole lot longer because by my count, you're not the 10th," he revealed.

Everyone stood up from their seats to review Amir's findings, including myself.

"1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6…7 was your grandpa Bernardo, the 8th was your father, which makes you the 9th."

"Holy shit he's right," Desmond agreed.

"So unless you've got a son that we don't know about, nobody's going to die!" Amir joked.

“We’re not gonna die!” Desmond celebrated as he and Amir danced and cheered together.

But rather than feeling victorious or joyful, I felt a harsh sinking wave of dread that made my palms sweat profusely, and judging by the ice-cold heart-dropping expression on Sydney’s face, she too had that feeling.

“Come on Remmy, this is good news…right?” Desmond stated after taking note of my mood.

“Is something wrong?” he asked further.

“Desmond-”

“Sydney,” I cut her off, but deep down I knew the secret had to come out someday.

“He needs to know,” she said.

Desmond glanced at the both of us with a concerned look.

“Need to know what?” he pressed.

“…This child I’m carrying…it might not be yours,” Sydney finally admitted.

I swear I saw his heart visually sink from his chest. He looked shattered.

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“I’m sorry Desmond,” Sydney apologized in tears.

“…Whose…whose is it then?” Desmond pried further.

Sydney had no words left, but her eyes pointed at me. Desmond looked at me with an expression that read betrayal.

“Remmy?”

“It was a big mistake,” I tried explaining. “We had one too many drinks up in Colorado, we didn’t really have control over ourselves and…I’m still not sure if anything happened, I’m just, you know…we made a bad decision.”

“…You’re kidding,” Desmond responded, then asked Sydney. “He’s kidding right?”

But Sydney slowly shook her head, leaving Desmond with a hole in his heart that slowly transformed and engulfed itself into a pit of boiling anger.

“You motherfucker,” he said to me in disdain.

“I’m sorry Desmond, I really am-”

“You motherfucker!”

Desmond lunged after me across the table. He managed to grab a hold of my collar and pull me towards his strikes. Amir tried to hold him back, but Desmond was a large man. Sydney pleaded for him to stop but he was already seeing red. I did my best to defend myself, but I failed to block a few hits to my face that still hurt to this day.

Eventually, Sydney squeezed herself between us and pushed Desmond back.

“Stop!” she commanded him.

The whole room then went silent, with nothing but the sound of heavy breathing from us all. My mother soon stepped in to find out what the commotion was all about.

“I loved you Sydney,” Desmond brokenly stated. “I fucking gave everything to you. Why the fuck…How could you do this to me? How!?”

Sydney lowered her head, ashamed. I did the same. Truly, neither she nor I really knew what happened between us in Colorado. We were so intoxicated some of those nights that our memory had left us with blotches of missing information in certain parts. But there did come an early morning where I awoke in a cabin room that wasn't mine to find Sydney asleep in the same bed as me. Neither of us were naked but neither of us were fully clothed either, and when I shook her awake to ask what had happened, she was just as clueless as I was. When I checked to see where Desmond was, I found him passed out on the hammock outside getting devoured by mosquitoes. Amir was also snoring in the room he and I shared, though when he eventually woke up he did ask me where I was the night before. I told him I awoke in the bathtub, and though he seemed to have bought that story, a part of me thinks he knew the truth but decided to keep quiet. And when Sydney fell pregnant, I was damn near prepared to flee the country thinking that I had ruined her relationship with Desmond, but Sydney assured me that the child was most likely not mine. Most likely. It does leave me to wonder if she had sexual intercourse with Desmond right after the incident with me, or if the incident simply happened sometime afterwards. Deep down I had always believed that the former was true, but regardless, neither she nor I knew who the father was. I never pushed for a paternity test because I was too afraid of what we'd learn, and I believe she too had that same fear. But over the months, the guilt was evident in the way she spoke. She knew that we were manipulating Desmond, and if that child did turn out to be his

in the end, then at the very least we still were keeping a dark secret from him. I too felt guilty, but how does one go about confessing a situation like this in hopes that the victim of infidelity comes to understand that it was never intentional? Though looking back on the situation now as a more mature adult, a part of me believes that it wasn't all a lack of intent. I wanted it, even if I had no recollection of that desire. I loved Sydney, I always did, and despite the many times I tried convincing myself that we were good as only friends, there was that itch within me that wasn't yet satisfied. I blamed Sydney's mother for holding me back all those years, and maybe if I had been given freedom to love Sydney the way I wanted to, things might have ended differently, but time unfortunately leaves us without second chances.

Later that Thursday evening, Desmond took off in his car but left Sydney and Amir behind. My mother offered to give them a ride back home, but she had lost her keys again, so we waited outside until she could find them. I quickly fetched all of my dream-related drawings from my desk and placed them in a folder, which I gave to Amir.

"These are all the sketches I've ever made about my dreams," I told him. "I want you to look through them, see if there's anything that stands out or looks familiar."

"I'll get right on it later tonight," he promised.

I patted him on the back and nodded, then walked over to Sydney. She was in a sheepish mood, and her eyes were puffy from all the tears.

“How are you doing?” I asked.

“We should have told him sooner,” she said in a raspy voice. “I led him on to believe so many lies all these months, he was so proud…What am I supposed to do now?”

“Try talking to him,” I suggested.

“I can’t.”

“Yes you can,” I encouraged.

“He won’t listen,” she dismissed.

“Yes he will. He’s got questions and he’ll want answers. You have to tell him the truth. Worst thing you can do right now is walk away,” I advised.

Of course, I’m not confident those were the exact words I said, but it was somewhere along those lines, and you’re right in calling me a hypocritical coward to have gone as long as I did withholding the truth from Desmond, only to have Sydney go on and explain it herself. I agree with that analysis, I should have gone and spoken with Desmond man to man, and if I could go back to do so I would but I must state again that time does not provide us second chances to fix our mistakes. It only leaves us with the memory of what is broken as a result.

“So I guess this means I’m carrying the 10th generation,” Sydney commented.

“We don’t know that,” I debated.

“I think we do Remmy,” she stated with confidence. “I think we do.”

Deep down we kind of always did, even if it wasn't with full certainty.

"I don't think an abortion is even possible at this point," she continued, "but even if it is, I don't want to go through with it."

I gave a face, probably one of disapproval, and Sydney noticed it.

"Call me selfish, but this is my child," she asserted. "I love him and I won't let a demon stop me from having him."

"Sydney I think we should talk more about this-"

"I said I won't let a demon stop me from having him Remmy," she repeated. "I won't."

I could see she was serious, and really there was nothing that could be done even if she wasn't serious. Third-trimester abortions only happened if there were some kind of life-threatening emergency that needed to be taken care of. I needed time to configure alternative options.

"Found them!" my mother exclaimed as she stepped out of the house jiggling her keys. "We ready?"

Amir nodded and mounted into my mother's car. I walked Sydney over to it, but before she stepped in, she looked at me to say one final thing.

"Find another way to stop Charlie Charlie. He can't have our baby."

I helped her into the car and waved goodbye as my mother drove them off. I spent the rest of the daylight brainstorming. I wasn't very good of a problem solver, my

solutions tended to be rash and impulsive, but even my stupid ideas seemed too stupid to work. My mind eventually went numb. I sat on my bed staring at the rope I had bought from the hardware store, the same rope I was going to use to kill myself. It was pointless now.

"I'm back!" I heard my mother's voice from downstairs.

I quickly hid the rope back into my backpack as she climbed up the steps and towards my room. She then opened the door and leaned on the frame.

"Hey," she said.

"Hey," I replied.

"What a crazy week, huh?" she remarked with a smile.

"Yeah," I chuckled.

She then came over and sat right beside me.

"You know when I was your age, I did a lot of wild stuff too," she began. "I rode down steep hills on bikes with no brakes, started wildfires with my friends…I was a dumb girl growing up. I ever tell you the first time I did cocaine?"

"I'd rather not-"

"It was at a friend's party," she went on. "My mother always told me to stay away from that stuff, but curiosity got the best of me, and when I tried some…WOW, what an experience that was. It was unlike anything I ever felt before, but I didn't tell my mother because I knew she'd kill me. And I kept on doing it over and over and over,

until one day I realized I couldn't stop myself. It had this unbreakable hold over me, but even then, I still didn't tell my mother. It wasn't until she caught me in the bathroom with it that she found out about my problem. I thought she was going to strangle me to death right there, but no. Instead she did the one thing nobody else did for me…she helped. She got me into rehab, connected me with a support group, and constantly checked in on me to see my progress. I haven't fallen into temptation since."

It was an odd story, one I had never heard before and I wondered where she was going with it.

"I guess what I'm trying to tell you Remiro is that you can tell your mother anything," she clarified. "I will be here to help you for as long as I live, that will never change. Don't keep things from me, okay? No more secrets?"

I nodded in appreciation and agreement.

"No more secrets," I repeated.

She then rubbed against my head and pulled me in for a hug. She had the best hugs, the warmest kind that could make all your problems go away, even if it were for only a moment.

"There is one thing I want to tell you, or rather, ask you," I added.

"What is it?" she asked.

"It's about Dad."

She frowned.

“I know, I know you hate talking about him, but I need to know Ma. I need to know why.”

My mother sighed.

“You want to know why he did what he did?” she paraphrased, to which I nodded.

“I have been asking myself that same question longer than you have. Why did he attack his own family? Why did he attack me? I never found an answer.”

“Could it be related to Charlie Charlie?” I inquired. “You’ve seen all of Amir’s research, what if Dad found out everything that we know now?”

“Honestly Remiro, I have no clue,” she replied. “I don’t even understand any of Amir’s research. All I know is that the man I married turned out to be a very bad man, and I really don’t like talking about him.”

I took that as a sign to try and change the subject, but before I could, her cell phone dinged.

“Ugh, it’s the hospital. Another overnight shift,” she rolled her eyes. “I won’t be back until tomorrow morning.”

She stood up from the bed and made her way out of the bedroom.

“Get some good rest, and stay home tomorrow. Amir is a smart boy, he can do the rest of that science lab on his own.”

“Okay, I will,” I nodded.

She then quickly dressed herself in scrubs and swiftly left the house, leaving me alone with my thoughts once more. I had grown tired at that point of trying to brainstorm any new ideas, so I shut the lights off and tried sleeping for a couple of hours, but the thoughts had resurfaced and prevented my eyes from closing. They were the same thoughts, the same ideas reiterated over and over, attempting to unveil a new possible outcome but never succeeding.

And then a new idea emerged in my head. It was stupid, and rather rash, but that was my style so I pursued it. I turned the lights back on and took a seat at my drawing desk. I grabbed a clean sheet of paper and drew two perpendicular lines, writing Yes No Yes No on the corners of the page. I then fetched another pencil and placed them both perpendicularly on top of each other. Then I took a deep breath. I was about to take on the Charlie Charlie Challenge for the very first time.

“Charlie Charlie are you there?” I asked.

All was silent and still for a moment, but after a brief while, the top pencil slowly rotated to “Yes”. My breath became jagged, I was nervous.

I then reset the top pencil and asked another question.

“Charlie Charlie, are you an ancestor of mine?”

All was silent and still again, but after a brief while, the top pencil slowly rotated to “Yes”. This of course was information I already knew, but receiving confirmation still made me uneasy.

I reset the top pencil.

“Charlie Charlie, am I your 10th generational child?”

The pencil nudged a bit towards “Yes” before rotating over to “No”. He must have found himself humorous.

I reset the top pencil.

“How about Sydney’s son?”

The pencil quickly rotated to “Yes”. That question was a two-for-one, as not only did I now know who the 10th descendant was, but it also confirmed that Sydney’s child was mine as well.

I reset the pencil once more, preparing to ask a big question.

“Charlie Charlie, have you collected enough souls?”

All was still and silent for a moment, but after a brief while, the top pencil slowly rotated to “Yes”. My hands shook, and I nearly lost balance in my legs. This meant that all that was needed was the birth of my son.

“No,” I muttered to myself, to which the top pencil responded by doing a full 360-degree rotation back to the same “Yes”.

He was taunting me, I wasn’t going to allow that.

“You listen to me loud and clear Charlie. You are forbidden from returning back to this world.”

The top pencil rotated to “No”.

“Yes, you will stay down in hell and burn there for the rest of time.”

The top pencil did another 360-degree rotation back to “No”.

“You have waited three centuries for this moment to come and Ima make damn sure it was all for nothing. You will not win! Do you hear me!?”

The top pencil spun another 360 rotation, then another and another. I stepped back as it did so repeatedly, faster and faster until it was spinning like a helicopter propeller. It then spun so fast that the shear force behind its velocity snapped the pencil in half. But he did not frighten me, not anymore. There was a new sense of determination that arose within me, along with a new idea I was too afraid to entertain before then. But I felt like it was necessary, to do one thing, one terribly horrible thing that would result in the salvation of all humanity. And I was willing to do it, I was willing to do whatever it took to stop this demon. I had to kill my son.

## Chapter 6

# Friday

I walked down the school halls at a slow pace, with a burning sensation in my eyes as I didn't catch any sleep during the night. Too much pondering, deciding…waiting. The conversations of the students all around me were muffled. My tunnel-vision was so proficient that I couldn't recall how I got to school, nor at what point I chose to grab the blade with the taped-over handle from the kitchen before leaving the house. I had it held down by my waist, concealing it behind my wrist so no one would notice.

And then I spotted Sydney. She was down at the end of the hall, completely clueless of the bad intent I had within me. I clenched the handle of the blade hard as I carefully approached her. She didn't even notice me coming, like prey oblivious of a sneaking predator. I wasn't prepared to harm her, much less in the way I planned to, but I assured myself that all I needed to do was strike the abdomen three or four times, and maybe two more for added measure. It sounded easy, it gave me the confidence I needed to go through with it.

But right when I was only a few steps away from Sydney, Amir accidentally bumped into me, unaware of my presence beforehand in that crowded hall.

“Remmy!” he exclaimed in excitement. “Oh man thank God I bumped into you. We need to talk about the new sketch you gave me.”

But I was uninterested in that topic. I tried to hide my exhaustion and tense attitude, but of course, Amir perceptively noticed.

“Jesus Remmy, you look like you didn’t sleep last night,” he said.

“I didn’t,” I admitted.

Amir then looked down from my shoulder to my hand and spotted the sharp blade held in my grasp. He immediately grabbed a hold of my arm.

“Whoa whoa whoa,” he panicked, “what the hell do you think you’re doing?”

“There’s no other way Amir. I have to do this.”

“No,” he shook his head. “Hell no.”

Amir then quickly looked around and tugged me away, leading me into the boys’ restroom. He shoved me inside and briefly checked to see if anyone was in the stalls.

“What the fuck are you thinking!?” he shouted.

Amir wasn’t the type to swear very often, much less raise his voice. I knew he was angry but I needed him to understand.

“Charlie has enough souls to leave hell, I asked him last night,” I explained. “All he needs now is for my kid to be born.”

“And so you brought a knife to school? To do what?” he grilled further.

“You know what Amir, you know what.”

For the first time in our friendship, I saw him look at me in a way I hadn't seen before. His eyes were filled with a certain fear, a fear of me.

"How could you?" he asked in disbelief. "Sydney's your friend."

"You think I want to do this!?" I stated in an outburst. "What part of there's no other fucking way don't you understand!? I'm all out of options man!"

"Remmy look at yourself, look at what you're about to do. This is exactly what your Dad tried doing to you, to your Mom," Amir pointed out.

"Yeah well, maybe he knew about Charlie too, maybe that's why he did what he did," I tried convincing myself.

"Or maybe there is another way around this, and what you're about to do will end up being the biggest mistake of your life," he countered.

"I really want to believe that man…but I don't. This has to be done."

Amir walked up to me and softly gripped my shoulder.

"Sydney hasn't given birth yet," he tried reasoning. "We still have time to find and explore other options. Please, don't do this."

He then held out his hand for me to hand over the blade.

"Be a better man than your father Remmy."

I took in a heavy breath, thinking on his words. I knew he had a point, there was some time left but I also knew there wasn't much. I looked at his hand for a moment and thought about my options, but after noticing my willingness to execute this plan

dwindle, I went to surrender the blade. But then a sudden thought whooshed across my mind, causing me to stop midway. I thought on his words some more and the intent behind them.

"Gehenna disguises themselves as those closest to me," I muttered before pulling the blade back towards myself.

"It's been you all along," I accused Amir.

"Remmy, I'm not Gehenna-"

"Then why are you trying to stop me?" I pressed on.

He looked more scared now than before, and he took a couple of steps back after realizing I wasn't joking.

"'Cause you're talking about murdering someone you care about man!" Amir tried rationalizing. "All this Charlie Charlie stuff is getting into your head Remmy. It's making you turn against your friends, you're not thinking straight."

"My mind's never been more clear," I said unwaveringly.

"Why the hell would I help you if I was Gehenna?" he argued. "I helped you find meaning to the symbols in your dream, didn't I? Why would I do that for you if it wasn't for-"

I grabbed him by the collar and pushed him up against the wall.

"You're trying to confuse me!" I accused him.

"Remmy, I'm your friend."

“You’re not my fucking friend!”

I then positioned the blade by Amir’s neck, hands trembling. I wasn’t planning on harming or killing him, I simply wanted a confession, for him to know that his cover was blown and that the gimmick was no longer working. But Amir remained calm. The fear he had before was gone and was instead replaced with fortitude.

“If that’s what you really believe then by all means go right ahead,” he encouraged. “You’re my best friend Remmy, I’ll stand by you till my dying breath just to prove that.”

I remember feeling empty, like there was nothing inside my head or body. I told myself that his words could have been practiced, memorized off of a script, but it didn’t feel that way. They were genuine, they were truthful, and they made tears crawl out from my eyes. Amir cautiously reached out and placed a hand on my chest.

“Lower the knife, we can forget this ever happened,” he comforted.

He then assisted me in lowering the blade. He gently took it away from my clench and patted me on the shoulder with a smile. I felt like absolute shit. How dare I treat such a good friend in this way? I wanted to apologize but I didn’t have the right words prepared. I simply watched him as he popped open the lid of a toilet tank in one of the stalls and dropped the blade inside.

“Why don’t we skip our next class together…maybe take a walk around the school block?” Amir suggested.

I took a breath and nodded. I needed to clear my mind, and so I followed Amir out of the building and took a peaceful stroll around it. Somewhere along the way, I finally found the right words to apologize with, to which he accepted and stated his understanding. He explained to me something called Cognitive Overload, a scenario where one is met with too much information at once, and as a result is unable to process the information very well, leading to mental, emotional and physical complications. With all that had happened throughout the week, with all that we learned that we didn't know before, Amir found my reaction to be more than reasonable. "No hard feelings" were his exact words. What a friend, oh how lucky I was to have one like him.

Amir and I walked back inside the school as the bell rang. Students exited out from their classrooms and cluttered the halls in an instant. I departed from Amir as he had his dreaded AP Calc next, then shuffled my way through the crowd to get to my next class. Along the way, I spotted Sydney, and she spotted me. I was hesitant at first but I urged myself to walk up to her.

"Jesus Remmy you look terrible," she greeted.

"I feel terrible," I replied. "I've been thinking nonstop of all the different ways I can stop this thing, but nothing seems plausible. I'm all out of ideas."

She then smiled, but it was one that was fought against by a sad frown as she pulled me in for a hug.

"We'll figure something out…together," she said.

The moment was swiftly spoiled by a haunting distant scream.

"FUCK! DESMOND'S FUCKING DEAD IN THE BATHROOM!"

Confusion and worriedness settled amongst everyone. I was skeptical that I heard those words correctly, but after seeing Sydney sprint down the hall towards the boys' restroom, I decided to follow. When I got there I found a handful of people grouped up together in shock, all staring in the same direction. I followed suit, and there he was. Desmond was hanging off of the noose of a rope, which was tied around the head rail of a bathroom stall. A group of us mustered up the courage to get him down, and one of the students went to check for a pulse on his wrist, but they announced that there wasn't one. Sydney dropped to her knees and cried out uncontrollable tears of anguish. I couldn't believe it, it didn't feel real at first, but as the time went by, and the authorities showed up, and the students were told to head home early, reality began to present itself, and I wasn't prepared to welcome it in.

Sydney wept continuously, but when I finally managed to get her sobs a little under control, I got her to tell me what had happened. She and Desmond were lab partners in Chem, so there was no avoiding him after Thursday's incident. Sydney took my advice and tried talking to him, but Desmond wasn't interested in hearing her words. He shouted at her loud enough for the entire class to hear, calling her out on her lies and manipulation. He was heartbroken and he was furious, and when the fury became too

much for him to handle, he stormed out of the class, which was the last she saw of him alive.

She then reverted to her sobbing once more and I did my best to comfort her. In the back of my mind however, I was analyzing her story as a detective would to a witness. After seeing the manner in which Desmond died and its resemblance to Pauline and her father's deaths, I wanted to uncover as many details as I could. According to Mister Bohannon, Gehenna only kills Caelum and those who support them, and as far as I knew, Desmond wasn't Caelum. He didn't have the tattoos that the Bohannons did, so something must have happened during the period of time after he had stormed out of Chemistry that resulted in, what I strongly believed, was his murder. If he had planned to cause harm to Sydney as a form of retaliation for her deception, then that may have been reason enough to kill him, but I needed some assurance to support this claim, which is why I sent Amir back into the school to retrieve information.

And after a while, I saw him come back out. I stepped away from Sydney to speak with Amir privately.

"Anything? I asked.

"They kicked me out before I could listen to any details, but I did hear the Chief say this is likely another suicide," Amir revealed.

"Unbelievable," I stated shaking my head. "Fucking unbelievable. Three people have died the same exact way this week, you'd think the police would pick up on that."

“I guess not,” Amir shrugged in equal disbelief.

He looked over at Sydney, who was still weeping away to herself.

“How’s she holding up?” he asked.

“Not good,” I answered. “I tried telling her it wasn’t a suicide but that’s not a conversation she wants to have right now. I think she blames herself.”

We observed her in silence for a moment. It was tragic seeing her broken in that way, she clearly loved the guy.

“So what now?” Amir asked.

“Best we can do is find a way to stop this thing,” I replied, “to stop it all.”

“I think I might know where to look,” Amir stated.

He then reached into his backpack and pulled out a folder of documents.

“I looked into the sketches you gave me yesterday and one of them had something I found interesting. A cabin,” he said as he showed me the sketch of a wooden cabin I had made some time ago. “There’s mention of a wooden cabin multiple times in some of the Gehenna journal entries I found. It’s like a church where they come together to worship Charlie. I looked into it online…and came across this.”

Amir showed me a photographed image of a wooden cabin surrounded by a forest. It looked identical to the one on the sketch.

“It’s located in the Santa Fe Forest just outside of Hyde Memorial State Park,” he sited.

“This is where the Gehenna People are hiding?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” Amir replied. “They could be there or they may have gone someplace else.”

I looked at the photographed image some more, then I looked over at Sydney. She was still very heartbroken, too broken to be left alone.

“We can’t leave Sydney here by herself, she needs someone to support her. You stay with her, I’ll check this cabin out,” I instructed.

“Remmy, we don’t know what could be waiting there,” Amir began cautioning. “It could be filled with murderous Gehenna cult members for all we know.”

“Or it could have the answers on how to stop them and Charlie,” I rebutted. “There’s not much of another choice Amir, I have to take my chances.”

Amir shook his head, clearly not liking how commonly reckless these ideas of mine were, but he then eventually sighed in acceptance.

“Alright,” he said. “I’ll text you the exact GPS location, but be very careful Remmy, these people are dangerous. If you don’t call back within the next two hours I’m calling the police.”

“I’ll be fine,” I promised. “You just make sure Sydney gets home safe.”

“I will,” he assured me.

I then wasted no time mounting onto my blue bike and following the route I had inputted on my phone. I biked through the same urban streets I had seen many people

play the Charlie Charlie Challenge before. I biked past the hardware store I had bought some rope from. I biked under the bridge where Pauline's body was found, and I kept on pedaling around the squeaky chain that transferred power onto the treadless wheels of the bike until I made it deep into the thick forest.

When I reached my destination, I stopped to look around. The GPS tracker had indicated that I was right where the cabin should be, but I saw no wooden cabin. I decided to dismount the bike and traverse around a bit, hoping to find some sort of trace of the cabin should it have already been torn down time ago. But as I walked a bit more, I noticed what looked like a man-made structure stashed away behind a vast wall of large trees. It almost blended in with the bark, and if I were not actively looking for it, I don't think I would have ever noticed a cabin was there. Thick vines had grown all about its walls, and the windows were boarded up with rotted-out planks. It looked abandoned, but that didn't stop me from concealing my bike in a nearby bush and walking in.

The door had no locks or handles, so I pushed it open and it exposed my presence with a groan. I peeked around but didn't notice anyone, so I carefully stepped further in. The interior was laid out much like a church. There were rows of benches, an altar at the front, carpet on top of the wooden floors, and unlit candles along the sides. But as I continued taking notes of my surroundings, I noticed that there were no crucifixes, no

Bibles or anything related to Christianity or any other religion. No God was worshiped here, but rather something else. I knew I was in the right place.

“Hello?” I called out. “Is anyone there?”

There was no response. The place seemed vacant, all was eerily quiet.

“I’ve been receiving visions, and they have brought me here to this location. I wish to submit to Charlie Charlie?”

That didn’t end up working either. I took note of how clean everything was. Outside you’d think no one had come across this cabin for centuries, but inside it looked as though someone had just left.

I started walking over to the altar up front, but on my way over I heard a profound CREAK after one of my steps. It wasn’t just regular floorboard squeaking, it sounded and felt different. I grabbed the carpet beneath my feet and pulled it away, uncovering the trap door I had stepped on. I thought it would only lead to a crawl space of sorts, but when I opened it, I saw an array of stairs that descended into a vast darkness. All the horror films I had seen in my life were telling me not to go down, but I didn’t come this far to back down over the fear of the unknown, so I mustered up what dim bravery I could and walked down the steps.

The blackness had no end. The light coming down through the trap door helped a bit, but soon rendered itself useless as I strayed further and further away from it in search of a wall or any kind of object. It was the largest basement I had ever come

across. As I continued venturing forward, I found a foul odor that only grew to be more putrid the more I followed it. I pinched my nose and turned on the flashlight on my cell phone, and the moment the light came on I was met with a face. I jumped back in a panic, but quickly calmed myself when I realized it was only a mask hanging on a wooden stand. The mask was black and in the shape of a skull, only it wasn't one that resembled a human's or any other living creature known to me.

I tried examining the mask further, but when I heard a slight movement within the darkness, I stopped. I stayed completely still to ensure it wasn't done by me, but then I heard it again. It was a ruffling.

"Is someone there?" I asked.

I shone my light in the direction of the movement and noticed a figure. I couldn't see them properly, so I cautiously got myself closer. And as I got closer, I began unveiling a clear view of the most diabolical thing I had ever seen in my life. There were two people tied against separate wooden posts right next to each other. Their mouths were sewn shut. Their eyes were gouged out. Their ears were burned off. Their hands and feet were dismembered. I could see bandages about their necks from where their voices were most likely taken. They could not speak or communicate in any way, I don't even think they knew I was there in that moment as I witnessed them both in utter dismay. And as I observed them some more, I realized that I had seen them before due

to the mole placements on their skin. These were the two Hispanic girls behind the viral Charlie Charlie video.

Over the years following this madness, I had come to the conclusion that these two girls weren't actually Gehenna themselves, but were coerced by Gehenna or forced by them to make the video. We must remember that once you play the game, your soul is being handed over to Charlie, which meant that someone had to sacrifice their own soul for the sake of the video. Gehenna was too cowardly to have it be one of their own. The girls were used as bait to lure the world, but to prevent them from telling their truth, their voices were stripped away. It sickens me just picturing what kind of agony they must have gone through, and not being able to express it.

I wanted to go over and help them both down from their posts, but as I panned the cell phone light lower, I discovered the horrifying root of the stench. Before me was a giant pit about the size of half a tennis court, filled to the brim with dozens of lifeless human bodies. Some were fully decomposed to bones, but others seemed days or weeks old. The sight of them nearly made me vomit. It wasn't just flesh and blood, it was pus and guts among other things I could not identify.

And then I heard footsteps, multiple footsteps from up above. Someone, a group, had entered the wooden cabin and was making their way to the basement. I could hear one of them mention the open trap door, and a few of them argued amongst each other on who was the last to close it.

I frantically looked around for a place to hide. The overwhelming darkness that surrounded me limited my options to only one: the pit of bodies. It was the last place I wanted to be in, but I had no other escape, so I forced myself to dive into the mushy pit and smear bodily fluids all over my skin and clothing as I crawled deeper. The smell was unfathomable, it irritated my eyes and left a bad taste in my mouth. Sounds of footsteps were rapidly closing in as they descended down the steps. I quickly placed the arm of one of the corpses over my face and shut off the flashlight on my phone, then proceeded to remain still and blend in with the dead.

I peeked open my eyes every so often, and I could see human-shaped figures moving about, though the darkness didn't allow me to identify them. I could see them put on their black skull masks along with black robes as they passed along candles and lit them on.

But there was one person among them who didn't wear a mask, nor black clothing, and he was being held or restrained by all the others. And as I continued to examine him from my position, I gradually began to realize that I knew who he was, as we had met before plenty of times. He was the school janitor.

"Guys come on," he pled with the masked cultists, "is this necessary? I had no other choice, he was going to kill the mother."

Chills went down my spine that left goosebumps on my skin. He had to have been talking about Desmond. I knew his death seemed suspicious. To think that he was angry enough to try and kill Sydney…to think that it was my own fault that he's dead now.

"I am one of you," the janitor continued. "I have been since I first got here. I would never do anything to jeopardize the plan His Greatness set in motion."

The cult members did not react or respond. They simply stood there, eerily still and silent.

"Why do I even bother trying to speak to you? Where's the Sacrificial Lamb?" he asked.

"I'm right here," said a crooked voice.

I saw the cult members step to the side, like an ocean parting in two to make way for their leader: The Sacrificial Lamb. They appeared grand and of the highest authority in the room as they approached the janitor, wearing a mask just like the others, only theirs was red and modified with accessories. The Sacrificial Lamb had a powerful stride about them, and I could tell all the others had nothing less than the utmost respect for them.

"Could you please tell them to unhand me?" the janitor begged.

With the lift of a hand from the Sacrificial Lamb, the cultists let go of their grasp on the janitor. He nodded in gratitude, then continued to plead his case.

“I have worked tirelessly to ensure the protection and safety of the child. I believe I have earned my place in witnessing His Greatness bring new order into our broken world. Why do you not feel the same?”

The Sacrificial Lamb had some kind of voice box built within their mask, I could hear their air come out distorted after every breath, similar to Darth Vader in a sense. And when they spoke, their words sounded out of tune and displeasing to hear.

“The fourth regulation of our Gehenna rulebook states: A soul stripped from the hands of the Devil must be replaced with the soul of he who took it,” replied the Sacrificial Lamb.

“How is that fair?” argued the janitor. “His intentions were to kill the mother and the child, I had to follow the first regulation. Was I wrong in doing so?”

The Sacrificial Lamb caressed the Janitor’s cheeks like a loving mother would to their child.

“I believe you did the right thing. Caelum and any who support their work must fall, but just as you have obeyed the regulations, I must also do the same.”

The janitor seemed upset by this, yet understanding. He nodded his head with a frown on his face.

“I get it,” he replied. “Thy will be done.”

He then turned to face the pit I was in and jumped in, walking on top of the many bodies it carried. I stayed as still as I could, but the janitor was headed directly towards

me. I grew worried that he might step on my face, or my crotch, so I braced myself for that kind of pain. Thankfully none of that happened, but he did stomp on my hand and I did my best not to flinch.

The janitor then stood by me and turned to face the Sacrificial Lamb, who came by the edge of the pit as the other cult members knelt down to their knees.

"Desmond Walders submitted his soul to His Greatness," the Sacrificial Lamb began. "You took his life, and in turn, stripped the Devil of a promised soul. We must directly deliver him yours instead as an apology and a plea for forgiveness. We do not wish this upon you, but as stated in the rulebook, it must be done. Are you ready?"

The janitor nodded.

"May we see each other soon enough, Sacrificial Lamb," replied the janitor.

The cultists then raised their hands in the air and swayed their bodies left to right, humming a harmonic melody that I recognized in an instant. It was the same melody I'd hear in my dreams, gothic, daunting, baritonic. The Sacrificial Lamb began chanting a series of words in a language I could not understand, though I could see on the janitor that the chants had an effect on him. His head tilted back, his hands made unusual gestures, his mouth dropped open. I could hear his breath escape from his body in a long hissing sequence.

Then he collapsed, and there he remained as motionless as all the other bodies in that pit. The chanting swiftly stopped, along with the humming. A deafening silence

returned. I planned out in my head to wait for the cultists to leave the basement and then wait another 30 minutes or so before making my escape, just to avoid the chances of running into any of them lingering about. But right as they were making their way back towards the steps, the sound of a ringtone stopped them in their tracks. It was my stupid damn cell phone that was in my front pocket. Amir was calling, my two hours were up. I couldn't do anything to try shutting it off, all eyes were in my direction at that point and I was in the middle of playing dead.

"What is that?" I heard the Sacrificial Lamb communicate, but they said it in Spanish. "Is someone there!?"

I kept my eyes shut and held my breath. I could hear the slushy steps of someone stepping into the pit and approaching my location. I'm certain that I had turned pale from fear at that point. But to my luck before anyone could discover me, I heard a cultist storm down the basement stairs and shout.

"Sacrificial Lamb, Sacrificial Lamb!" they exclaimed in Spanish. "I come bearing wonderful news!"

"What is it?" asked the Sacrificial Lamb.

"It's the mother of the child. She's in labor!" answered the cultist. "The vessel belonging to His Greatness will be delivered shortly!"

"Are you certain?" the Sacrificial Lamb queried.

“Yes yes,” assured the cultist. “She has been taken to the hospital just moments ago!”

“Then we must act quickly,” responded the Sacrificial Lamb. “Gather everyone, prepare the ceremony. Today is the day His Greatness returns!”

The cultists cheered amongst themselves, I heard some of them cry in celebration. Hearing this myself though, I didn’t find the news nearly as joyful. Sydney must have fallen into labor due to the traumatic stress Desmond’s death put her through. It worried me that the cultists knew where she was, yet I figured I had an advantage because not only did I also know where she was, but the cultists didn’t know that I knew, which gave me hope that I might be able to beat them to her. The mention of a ceremony also made me ponder a bit. I had come to the cabin in search of a way to stop Charlie Charlie. If this ceremony failed to take place, then perhaps there was a chance to prevent Charlie’s return altogether. I simply needed to get to the hospital before Gehenna did, but of course, my efforts were obstructed.

“Someone go shut that noise off!” the Sacrificial Lamb ordered in response to my cell phone still ringing.

I squinted one of my eyes open and saw all the cultists follow the Sacrificial Lamb out of the basement, except one. This cultist jumped into the pit of bodies and began trailing the ringtone. My mind raced in circles like a NASCAR track, contemplating all

my options and the possible outcomes that may arise from them, but in the end I decided to play it safe and just remain completely still.

The cultist came over to me and patted me down. They soon located my phone and reached into my pocket to pull it out. The ringtone then stopped as the cultist denied Amir's call. They then tossed the phone back over to me, but instead of leaving, I felt their presence loiter for a bit longer. The cultist eventually moved the arm covering my face out of curiosity and gasped.

"Remiro?"

I did not think, I simply jumped at the cultist in that moment and attacked them. We wrestled each other on top of the dozens of corpses. The cultist appeared to be male at that point, and he was roughly my size, if not a bit heavier. But despite his advantage over me, I managed to overpower him and grapple him in a headlock. I held him there, trying to choke him out until he passed out, but the bastard managed to break free. I then persisted in struggling with him some more until we took the fight over to where the janitor laid dead. The cultist rolled me across the janitor's corpse and we accidentally flipped his body over, where a blade wrapped in a garbage bag slipped out from the janitor's back pocket.

The cultist and I briefly looked at each other, then jumped after the blade, fighting for possession over it. He nearly won it over me, but his hands, which were fully baptized in fluids and human excrement, failed to keep a firm grip on the blade and it

slipped out from his fingertips, allowing me to grab a hold of it. I tried warning the cultist to stay back but he had already pounced onto me before I could get the words out, so out of the sheer will to survive, I was left with no other choice but to stab this cultist. I drove the blade into his torso, and when he lunged at me again I stabbed him two more times. I prepared myself to deliver another jab if needed, but the cultist by then had learned his lesson and kept his distance. But unfortunately, it was already too late. The cultist struggled to breathe, I could hear him gargle in what I believe was his own blood, so to help him in a way, I removed his mask.

I was shocked to find that the face I was looking at was Toby's. I felt a great sense of pity and dread, the poor kid was manipulated into a path he did not deserve, and as a result, he was going to die for it. It wasn't right. He tried to speak but no words came out, and I knew there was nothing that I could do to help him, so I held onto his hand to comfort him as he went. He did not go swiftly, he suffered and he died afraid. It's a moment that still haunts me all these years later.

I did not want to just leave him there lying with all the other corpses, nor did I want to leave the two girls who were still strapped to wooden posts, but there were more essential matters that I felt needed my attention. I caught my breath and grabbed my cell phone to return to my pocket. I then picked up the blade, and after looking at it with the fight-or-flight sequence now subsided, I noticed the tape over the handle. It was the same blade I took to school, the same one that Amir stashed into the toilet

tank, the same one that, I believe, Desmond somehow came across and planned on using against Sydney. That's the only reason I can come up with that explains why the janitor had it in the end.

I wrapped the blade around the same garbage bag that the janitor had it in, then placed it in my own back pocket. I then made my way out of the pit and up the stairs, exiting the basement. As I stepped outside of the cabin, I ensured that the coast was clear before carefully making my way over to where I had stashed my bike. At the same time, I figured it would be best to call Amir and warn him of the danger approaching.

"Remmy?" he answered.

"Amir, are you with Sydney?" I asked.

"Yeah, I tried calling you man, she just went into labor. Ambulance brought her over to Saint Vincent. Are you okay by the way? What'd you see?"

"No time for that right now," I dismissed. "Amir, Gehenna cult members know Sydney's in labor."

"What?" Amir panicked.

"They're coming for her now," I continued. "My Mom works at that hospital. Find her, let her know what's going on. She'll be able to keep Sydney hidden and safe."

"Okay okay. What are you gonna do?"

I fetched my bike out of the bush and began running along with it towards the trail I had taken before.

“I’m making my way to you guys now,” I answered Amir. “The Gehenna People mentioned a ceremony. I think maybe if we keep them from performing that ceremony, we might be able to beat this thing. Just keep your eyes peeled, don’t let anyone other than my Mom near Sydney.”

“Alright I got it. Get here quick.”

And with that, I hung up the call and mounted onto the bike, cycling as fast as those brittle pedals could handle. Gehenna had a head start against me due to my run-in with Toby, which did worry me, but knowing that my mother would be there to hold them back soothed my nerves a bit. Still, there was no telling what Gehenna was willing to do to get their hands on Sydney, so I biked hard and quick until my quads were screaming in a burning pain that became too intolerable for me to handle. Even then though, I pushed as hard as I could, and eventually arrived at Saint Vincent.

When I got there, the sky was starting to cloud up much like how they were in my dreams. I didn’t pay much mind to it though and quickly dismounted the bike to sprint into the hospital. Upon arriving, I looked around and immediately noticed a frantic energy that felt unusual. Hospital staff were hurriedly moving around, rushing with panicked faces, much like how the police officers acted at the police station when Pauline escaped her cell. I ignored the chaos and walked up to the front desk.

“I’m here to see my mother, Audrina Mejias,” I stated, but the front desk receptionist neglected my words as they were in the middle of an urgent phone call.

It seemed as though everyone was busy. I saw security guards run by with their weapons unholstered.

“Hey! What’s going on!?” I shouted.

“Situation’s being handled,” was the response I received before they ran off.

*What situation?* I wondered.

“Remmy,” I heard from a faint voice.

I looked over and saw Amir being rolled through the area in a stretcher by a team of medical staff. He had a slash wound across his gravely bruised face.

“Amir! What happened!?”

The medical team tried shoving me away as they continued transporting Amir but I fought back to keep by his side.

“They took her Remmy…she took her,” he said.

“Who did?” I questioned further. “Amir who!?”

He said a word but I couldn’t pick up on it, and by then there came another handful of staff members who held me back and told me I was prohibited from proceeding any further. “She took her” were the only words I had to go off of. Why would he say that? Did I misinterpret his slurred speech? If not, then who is “she”? There were a couple of answers that came to mind, and a few of them I had really hoped to be wrong about, but the only way to be certain was to find out for myself.

I knew where Gehenna was taking Sydney, perhaps not the precise location but I knew it was somewhere in the forest, which meant I had to bike all the way back. And so I darted out of the hospital building and jumped back onto my bike. I biked through the same urban streets I had seen many people play the Charlie Charlie Challenge before. I biked past the hardware store I had bought some rope from. I biked under the bridge where Pauline's body was found, and I kept on pedaling away with my exhausted legs until I made it back into the thick forest.

I arrived at the cabin anew and barged through the old wooden door, only I didn't find anyone inside as I had expected. I did notice however that all the candles were gone, taken elsewhere. I then heard a crack outside, the sound of a stick snapping apart. It could have been an animal of sorts walking around, but I had to be sure, so I stepped out. I looked around but there didn't seem to be anyone nearby. I stood there and stared among the vast amount of trees. There was no one in sight, but I knew deep within me that they were there.

"Cowards!" I shouted. "I know you are there! Show yourselves!"

Nothing. No movement, no answer. All remained the same.

"I said show yourselves!" I demanded.

For a brief second, the persistent stillness led me to believe that there may not have been anyone nearby in that moment. But then, all at once, ten, maybe twenty cult members came out from hiding behind the trees to stare back at me with their

blacked-out masks. It petrified me, it really did. They then began to approach me slowly as they hummed the same harmonic melody that I was long acquainted with.

I prepared to make a run for it back inside the cabin to try and find some sort of hiding spot before they'd eventually find me regardless, but before I could make an attempt, I found myself being dragged across the grass with a groggy memory of how I got there. I peered down at my leg, and though my vision was rather blurry, I could see a silhouette grabbed onto my ankle, leading me towards wherever they were headed. My recollection of this portion in time is spotty. I seemed to have faded in and out of consciousness multiple times, but at some point, I did fully awaken to notice that I had been tied against a rock of sorts with rope. Upon further inspection, I realized that this rock was a stone pillar, a monolith to be exact, and all around me there were similar kinds. This was the place I had been dreaming about for my entire life.

The cultists were also scattered about, humming harmoniously in sync. I saw Sydney crying and calling my name. She was strapped to the platform at the center, and though I tried to break myself free from the rope's clutch, I was not strong enough.

The Sacrificial Lamb then entered the ceremonial stage carrying a sickle in their hand. They walked up to Sydney and silenced her with their presence alone, and they raised the sharp point of the sickle and gently grazed it against her belly.

"Your tearful cries will not be heard out here," said the Sacrificial Lamb. "So keep going, it won't help you any."

Sydney began to sob profusely. It tortured me seeing her so terrified.

“What the fuck is wrong with you people!” I cried out.

Then all at once, as if they shared a mind, the cultists looked at me. The Sacrificial Lamb let out a small chuckle, then raised their free hand to their mask. They took off the red mask to reveal to me their face, and it was this exact moment that stripped me from ever being able to trust in anyone again. It was the face of my mother.

The other cultists also took their masks off, and among them were people that I had seen before, such as the chief of police, the medical examiner, the fucking homeless dude that hung out by my local barbershop. They had been everywhere around me all this time.

“Wha…..why are you…who…” I began to say, though my shattered mind was unable to piece my thoughts together.

“Do not worry, my sweet Remiro. Your death will help you forget that any of this even happened,” my mother said mercilessly.

“What the hell are you even saying?” I asked, still processing it all. “Where is this coming from, this isn’t you. I am your son…do you not feel pity?”

“I was Gehenna long before I became your mother,” she again replied mercilessly. “This world is full of malice, corruption and sin. I serve Charlie Charlie because I know he’ll bring order back again.”

“By committing wicked acts of his own?” I argued. “He is malice, he is corruption…he’s a man as evil as the Devil himself! How could you serve such a man?”

My mother laughed as though I were naive.

“Did you know that in the scriptures, God has killed many more people than the Devil? Millions of people died by his hands and yet people have been worshiping him for over two thousand years. Do you know why that is? Fear. People are afraid of God because of what terrible things he’s capable of doing. Our fear of Charlie Charlie is very much the same, the only difference being that God does nothing for his people. He neglects their need for him, ignoring their calls, and he allows this world to be infected by their evil. Charlie Charlie must return to correct God’s mistakes.”

“People will die!” I countered, “and the world will die with us. There will be no salvation, only pain and suffering. Why can’t you see that?”

“Do not act as if you know His Greatness better than I do,” she lectured me. “I was born and raised to serve him, you were born and raised to deliver him.”

“Is that all I ever was to you? A small piece to a bigger plan…nothing more?” I asked.

She then came closer to me and lowered herself to my level. I got to see those same motherly eyes in her gaze one last time, only they weren’t truly the same anymore.

“My love for you has always been genuine,” she stated, “but my love for His Greatness always comes first.”

She then walked away back to the pedestal as the cultists passed around candles. One of them placed a white liturgical vestment over my mother. The ceremony was about to start.

I shimmied my body in place, trying to wriggle free from the rope but they were wrapped around me and the pillar too firmly.

“You should be grateful Remiro,” my mother stated. “You will get to see Charlie Charlie perform his wonders. I am not so lucky. I’ve submitted my soul to communicate with him, and so I will be spending an eternity in hell, but if it means that His Greatness will finally be set free, then so be it.”

She then faced the cultists and announced “Let us begin!”

The cultists began humming their familiar melody with their lit candles in hand. My mother approached Sydney with the sickle in her hand.

“Charlie Charlie, we call upon your mighty presence today as the time for your return has finally arrived,” my mother prayed in Spanish. “Your imprisonment to the Devil is over. We ask that you return to Earth so that you may lead our people once more. Rid these lands of malevolence. Shape it to your vision, and bring forth our eternal paradise.”

Sydney squirmed and pleaded for help. I pushed forward with all my might and paid no mind to the pain that came as the rope tugged me back, yet despite my best efforts, I could not break free. But as I struggled, I felt something in my rear end and

remembered that I had the taped-over blade stowed in my back pocket. I maneuvered myself in a way where I could get one of my hands to reach towards that pocket, and eventually, I pulled out the garbage bag. I glanced around to make sure no one was looking my way, then unraveled the bag to get to the blade, where I began cutting away at the rope. It was stubbornly thick, and the blade wasn't exactly all that sharp but I was making progress…though, not quickly enough.

My mother slowly raised the sickle over Sydney's belly. Sydney freaked out and shook her body frantically, yelling at the top of her lungs for help. I called out for her, I pleaded for my mother to stop, but it was as if I were mute, no acknowledgement.

When I felt like the blade had cut a good amount through the rope, I gave it a tug and managed to break free. I then quickly charged after my mother with the blade in hand, with the only thing in my mind being to try and stop her. But I was quickly swarmed by the many cultists that surrounded her, I stood no chance. They stripped the blade from my hands and held me still, forcing me to watch.

"I will now present to you your promised vessel," my mother invoked.

And then she did it. With a complete lack of compassion, she stuck the sickle into Sydney's stomach and cut open the womb. The screams that I heard that evening are the most dreadful thing I've ever listened to, I simply cannot bring myself to explain it any further. There are no words that exist to explain it, it was that nightmarish, that gruesome. Sydney's agony was so pronounced that it ingrained itself into every part of

me. Every sound I hear now that carries the most subtle resemblance brings me back to that terrifying minute. Hell, it may not have even been a minute, time just seemed to move so painfully slow, it was unjust.

During Sydney's final moments, she locked eyes with me, and I with her. I wanted to show her that I was there, that she wasn't alone. I wanted to be strong for her, but it was hard, oh so very hard. The anguish, the blood, the last few tears. I watched her life slowly fade away, a human being turned into an empty shell. I couldn't bear to stand for much longer, I allowed my legs to surrender. The cultists held me up for a while, but when they grew tired of carrying my weight, they let me drop to the ground, where I bawled and bawled incessantly.

I then heard the sound of an infant crying. I looked up and saw my mother pull out a baby from Sydney's womb. She got onto her knees and held the baby up in the air.

"The time for your return is now, my savior. Rise! Lead us again! Take this vessel and claim it as your own!"

Nothing happened at first, but the stillness was swiftly broken by a huge gust of air that blew out all of the candles. The ground began to shake, and I heard what sounded to me like a demonic roar. I saw the dirt on the ground sink down, and something was clawing its way out. Before I could witness any more, I felt myself losing control over my own body. My eyes went dark as if I had gone blind, and I couldn't move, couldn't speak, couldn't breathe. I figured I had died and that this was the end. It was over, I had

lost. Images of my life played out in my head. I saw my first day in kindergarten, the day I learned to ride a bike…the day I fell in love with Sydney. But as it cycled through, I came to remember the day I broke Toby free from his calling. Though I wasn't entirely sure it was actually my doing that snapped him out of it, I felt a willingness in me to give it one final Hail Mary. I told myself to fight back, and though it was fruitless at first, my persistence began showing results. My vision flickered on and off, the control over my body was slowly shifting back towards me. I clenched onto that control as hard as I could, breathing intensely, fighting relentlessly.

I soon came to realize that I was still on the ground, and right by me was a dense stone that was an arm's length away from me. I reached for it, gripped onto it, and with all my might I jumped up from the ground and bolted towards my mother. I could hear the cultists gasp in shock, some of whom chased after me. I could also see through my peripheral vision a massive four-horned figure ascending from an opening in the ground. I disregarded them all, I knew this was my last chance.

Time felt as though it moved in slow motion. I could almost hear the second hand ticking at the pace of minutes. I had my mother in sight. Her head was tilted back, her eyes were rolled up. She had no knowledge of what I was coming to do. I snatched the crying baby from her grasp and plopped the child down on the ground. And without truly thinking, without being aware of my actions, I raised the dense stone in my hand up into the air…and slammed it down as hard as I could. I then did it again, and again,

and again, and even as the blood splattered onto my face and the child's cries ceased to exist, I kept going. It wasn't long before the cultists tackled me away from the child, but by then it was already too late. My son was dead, and I had killed him.

The cultists held me back and whispered amongst each other. I could hear some of them comment on how cruel I was, how sick-minded I had become.

"You imbecile!" my mother shouted my way. "You've taken your son's life for nothing. His birth allows Charlie to use anyone in his bloodline as a vessel, including you. Now it is your body that he will use to restore order."

I looked over to the four-horned figure and finally got a clear view of Charlie Charlie. His build wasn't symmetrical. His face was smeared like clay, and his orange eyes were faded. He was monstrous, he was not pleasing to look at, and yet I wasn't afraid of him, not anymore, because to me he looked weak, powerless…and this I knew because I was the one who stripped him of that power.

I looked back into my mother's heartless eyes and curled up a smirk.

"No he won't," I replied.

And as if I had commanded it, Charlie Charlie began to slowly crawl himself back down to hell while the cultists observed in complete shock.

"I played the game too," I explained, "which means my soul now belongs to the Devil. A body without a soul is a body that cannot be corrupted, cannot be controlled…I've won."

I couldn't help but laugh through the tears, despite the deaths and the tragedies I had faced and witnessed. A great burden had lifted off of my shoulders. I knew I sold my soul to the Devil but it didn't matter, the imminent threat was over. Charlie Charlie had failed, he had lost, and so did his followers, which they did not take lightly. They began cursing abominable words my way, and eventually swarmed around me to kick and punch me, even spitting on my face out of aggression. One of them grabbed the same rock I had used to kill the infant, another grabbed the taped-over blade.

"No!" my mother commanded. "Do not kill the vessel."

"What good is the vessel if His Greatness cannot use it?" argued one of the cultists in Spanish.

"I hear voices this direction," said a distant voice coming from the thick trees.

There were flashlights approaching us beneath the dimming sun. The police were on their way.

"We will find another way. This is not over yet," my mother stated.

She then ran into the depths of the forest, and the cultists followed right behind her. They disappeared into the shadows right as police officers stormed the scene. They surrounded me with shocked expressions, pointing their guns right at me. They shouted at me to surrender and to raise my hands, to which I abided by their commands. Nothing mattered anymore, there wasn't anything that could happen that

worried me in that moment because I was muttering to myself the same words over and over again. “I’ve won…I’ve won…I’ve won”.

But as the police officers placed me in cuffs and grilled me with questions, and as the paramedics swooped in to pronounce Sydney and the infant as deceased, the comfort in my mumbles began to fall apart. I had lost so much in such a small period of time, I never fully grasped at it all as a whole. And when I finally did, I was met with a sudden emptiness that forced me to realize that I had won…but at what cost?

## Chapter 7

# Epilogue

It has taken me a little over three years to fully write this retelling of my life, partly due to the obscene amount of supervision I am constantly under, as well as the internet access restrictions implemented in this place. I tried handwriting a couple of times but they kept on confiscating my pages without giving proper reason.

After the police arrested and tossed me into a cell, I was charged with two separate counts of first-degree murder. They were adamant that I was responsible and that I was attempting to perform some kind of sick ritual. The detectives did give me the opportunity to state my case, and though I initially tried explaining the realities of demons and cults, I quickly gave up after realizing the lack of chance that they'd believe me. Not to mention, I was unsure of who to trust. Gehenna could have very well been the person held up in the holding cell beside me, just itching for the chance to shank me in my sleep.

Despite this though, I did tell the detectives about the wooden cabin, and the pit of bodies in the basement along with the two disfigured girls, yet their response to me was typical. "We didn't find anything". The only thing, or person, that I had to back my

story was Amir. However, due to the immense deficiency in evidence supporting my claims and the overall absence of anyone who believed in me, my public defender urged for a not guilty plea by reason of insanity. In other words, I was insane. I urged to have Amir testify as a witness, but my public defender strongly suggested against this as his testimony would likely not be believed and he could potentially be held accountable for perjury. In other words, I had to claim to be insane. I underwent a psych evaluation, and though I thought they'd understand that I was a sensibly rational person with a stable mind by answering truthfully, they determined instead that I was indeed clinically delusional.

It was a tormentous process. At first nobody found my statements to be credible, but as time went on and I persisted with these statements, people stopped paying mind to them overall. I felt like the boy who cried wolf, but the wolf was real and had been since the beginning. Someday soon that wolf is going to kill us all, I am sure of it, because I still receive those secondary callings, the dreams of the monoliths in the forest. It leaves me to believe the last words I heard my mother speak. "This is not over yet".

I've spent countless nights brainstorming all the possible things Gehenna might do to bring Charlie Charlie back, but for the longest time I couldn't come up with anything. It did bring a sense of ease upon me for a short while, until one night I was disturbed by two large men who stormed into my room, one who restrained me by the

arms and the other who refrained me from screaming. Then came in a woman who bore a sinister smile. She took off her garments, leaving herself completely nude, then grabbed my pants and slipped them down just enough to expose my genitals. She then proceeded to sexually assault me. I struggled and fought as best as I could, but in the end I was not strong enough. When it was finally over, she left the room carrying my seed with her, and the two men followed her out. I knew that the purpose of this was to birth a new descendant of the Charlie Charlie bloodline so that he may possess the infant and kill millions in the process, and this thought petrified me dearly.

But then I awoke, and realized that it was only a dream, a nightmare that served as a warning. If Gehenna were to discover this newfound strategy to set their plans back into motion, then all the people I had lost along the way would have died for nothing. That meant Sydney, Desmond, Pauline, Mister Bohannon, my son…hell even my father. I had to ensure that their deaths were not in vain, which meant ensuring that Gehenna could never win.

There was another patient in the psychiatric hospital who had a proper name but went by the name of Chomper due to the manner he ate his food. He was aggressive with his bites, you could always hear the two rows of teeth smacking against each other. The medical staff had tried to coach him on the correct form to chew, but he never did implement their teachings. He also had an obsessive craving for pudding. It was utilized as a complementary treat for good behavior, and seeing how my plan required

Chomper's cooperation, I enforced myself to be a good boy for a solid two weeks or so, stockpiling on the pudding that I was rewarded with. When I felt as though I had enough, I initiated my plan.

It was fairly simple, but of course, easier said than to follow through. I tailed Chomper around for a bit until I found him settled alone in a room entertaining himself with a puzzle game. I approached him and asked if he was interested in some pudding, to which he immediately responded by nodding in excitement. I gave him my offer and detailed what I needed in return. He knew it wasn't going to cost him much, I was the one paying the price. Chomper agreed to the terms, and with a breath of nervous air, I lowered my pants to reveal myself to him as he got to his knees in front of me. And before I could change my mind, I gave him the go-ahead, and without hesitation, Chomper mauled onto my genitals and tore them off in big bloody chunks. I had mentally prepared myself beforehand for the pain this would ensue, but nothing could truly prepare me, and so I shouted my lungs out in agony before blacking out.

I then came to in the infirmary where the nurse there informed me of Chomper's transfer to a different facility. I unfortunately wasn't able to hold up my end of our deal, but at the very least after fully healing, I was able to return to my room and indulge myself in a copious collection of expired desserts.

And though my plan was complete and this loose end was tied, I still feel uneasy by the presence of the unknown. Not knowing what Gehenna might be scheming leaves

me unable to sleep well at night, and unable to think straight during the day. I had no one I could trust, no one who believed me, not even anyone who could recall ever being in a trance during that Friday evening. Everyone who had played the game fell into a trance, and this I know because it happened to me and I saw it happen to my mother, but I was the only one who broke free from it, which perhaps is the reason why I'm the only one who seems to have any memory of that experience.

The only person that I've been able to confide in was Amir. He would visit from time to time, catching up and sharing with me any of his findings, though none of them were ever sufficient. He would often times gift me books, which he did knowing that there wasn't much else to do to pass the time than to read. It's because of him that I've been able to expand my vocabulary better than I ever could before. I was grateful to still have him by my side, but somewhere along the years he stopped showing up. It's unclear what had happened, but I believe Gehenna has done something to him, possibly because he found a certain way to stop them once and for all, or worse, that he found a way they might succeed and tried to warn me about it. All I know is that he's gone now, and I doubt he's coming back.

I also don't know what has happened to my mother. She definitely hasn't given up her Gehenna ways but she must have made a new life elsewhere, perhaps as a nurse at a different hospital or as a mother to a new family. Wherever she might be, I do hope that she's doing well, and should she be reading this at all, I want her to know that I still

love her. How can I not? Even if the love she showed was spurious, it still felt real enough to me, and I'd do anything to get that love back, anything.

And now I must address you once again, dear reader. As I've stated before, I am unsure if there is any other way that Gehenna might be able to bring Charlie Charlie back, and since I no longer have Amir to aid me, I am left with no one else to turn to but you. This writing of mine is not just a story, it is my story, and it also serves as a plea for help. I need your awareness, and I need the awareness of everyone you know and the people that they know, and for this awareness to spread amongst everyone as fast as possible so that they can all shine a light onto this evil lurking in the dark. I beg that you trust me when I reiterate once again that this is all in fact very real, and very dangerous.

There's no telling what will happen to me once this writing gets out, and though you might be curious enough to search up my name or look for any validity of the events I've spoken of, I'll spare you the disappointment now by disclosing that you won't find anything, and I know this because I've already checked myself. But you must understand, dear reader, that this is all a great cover-up initiated by Gehenna. They want to keep you second-guessing, to make those who recall hints of this story question their own memory. They have planned to do this all along in case they failed in bringing Charlie Charlie back, going as far as to fabricate the narrative that he was the ghost of a young Mexican boy who died a tragic death. Do not believe in their bogus, do not ignore

their attempts to rewrite history. They have erased all the true records of Charlie Charlie, all the reports that back my statements as well as my name and the names of all those I knew, as if none of it ever existed. But I beg of you once again, I BEG, please believe in these words that I write to you, because if you don't then we are all in grave danger.

Charlie Charlie must never be unleashed from his cage. Gehenna must never conjure him back. The fate of our lives, the lives of those you love, humanity as a whole, lies in your hands. So please, dear reader, spread the awareness, tell all the people that you know. Share with everyone, but trust no one.